

School of Design & Art

Close Focus: Interpreting Western Australia's Visual Culture

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

Date: 31 March 2011

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ABSTRACT

Distance from the centres of world art and from national hubs of creative practice provides both opportunities and constraints for Western Australian visual artists. Informed but isolated, they have learned to direct the lens shaped by received ideas onto the extraordinary natural environment they inhabit. Regional perspectives influence this act of re-focusing, which is inflected by local knowledge and personal experience in a process of re-invention and re-imagination that has escalated since the Second World War.

The objective of this PhD by supplication is to situate my practice as an art historian, critic and curator within the broader context of Australian visual culture and to examine how the process of assimilation, described by George Seddon as taking 'imaginative possession', has contributed to our understanding of local identity within the wider framework of a national identity.

In my writing and through my activity as a curator of exhibitions over the past two decades, I have identified the importance of local conditions in generating a critical, regional practice and I have shown how imported ideas have been absorbed, modified and accommodated within the work of the State's leading artists to create a vibrant sense of regional identity that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of a wider and more comprehensive view of cultural practice in Australia.

Introduction

Establishing a critical framework for interrogating Western Australia's visual culture

In my work as a writer, critic and curator over the past twenty years I have examined the role of the visual arts in shaping Australian culture. Over the past decades I have articulated an inclusive history of Australian art practice. This activity has been motivated by my determination that the work of artists based outside Australia's eastern and southern seaboard capitals should not be marginalised or ignored. As a consequence, the reasons why Western Australian art and artists were acknowledged or excluded from major publications was initially a major focus of my writing. This proselytising zeal has continued. The body of work I have generated, together with that of other researchers, now forms a solid platform from which to assert my case: since the Second World War the visual arts in Western Australia have established a vibrant sense of regional identity that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of a wider and more comprehensive view of cultural practice in Australia.

My work has been based on the premise that the visual culture of Western Australia documents a local response to international and national issues that, by its very presence, not only contributes to the larger history of Australian visual culture, but also offers a distinctive perspective to that larger narrative. My work has been presented in books, articles and exhibitions that have focused on the work of selected Western Australian artists, work that enabled me to investigate the nature of creative practice in this place. How this curatorial and research project has developed is the core of this exegesis, framing the ideas and providing a structure through which ideas have been explored and arguments developed.

The curator as interpreter and arbiter is a recent development in the visual arts, emerging in the twentieth century during a period of exponential growth within cultural institutions when the activities

associated with the management, conservation and display of collections was formalised into professional roles. The original meaning of the word 'curator' is 'one who manages or oversees, as the administrative director of a museum collection or a library (1661), from the Latin *cūrātor*, overseer, from *cūrātus*, past participle of *cūrāre*, to take care of'¹ and initially associated with the care of minors and lunatics. Today the term refers to the curator as judge and selector of works for inclusion in public and private collections, and equally significantly, as interpreter through the presentation of artworks in exhibitions. During the late twentieth century these two roles often became fused, as the selection process for inclusion in collections and exhibitions increasingly intertwined with the activity of developing exhibitions.²

Exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known. Not only have the number and range of exhibitions increased dramatically in recent years but museums and art galleries such as the Tate in London and the Whitney in New York now display their permanent collections as a series of temporary exhibitions. Exhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed.³

This joint task of selection and interpretation is the basis of any curatorial project and in my work over the past two decades I have undertaken the development of exhibitions, journal articles, books, my work for the media and teaching within the general framework provided by the curatorial process. In all these activities, as with every exhibition, the questions confronting me were how to construct meaning by reinforcing the relationship between different works and the context within which they were created.

As Rachel Weiss has explained, exhibitions are principally a discourse and hence the very idea of an exhibition presupposes an audience and a

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Third Edition (Oxford University Press) 1985, p.236.

² An example is the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery, which purchased works specifically for the exhibition as a way of securing those they required to elucidate their curatorial thesis, while simultaneously building their holdings of contemporary work from the region.

³ Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Fergusson and Sandy Nairne (1996, p.2).

level of engagement or interaction. The exhibition is both a way for engaging that audience and of establishing a meeting ground where artists, museum professionals, educators, academics and other researchers develop ideas and explore the potential of the relationship of images and texts to communicate meanings.

Exhibitions are inherently reductive in that they select certain objects to the exclusion of all others in order to construct a narrative or argument that is deemed important. In its broadest sense ... exhibitions can be seen as a conveyer of fundamental philosophical principles underlying societies, first of all with their taxonomic assumptions reflecting a general rationalist consensus which has existed for centuries in the West and, further, in the particularities of the interpretations of meaning and value (around which) the exhibition is structured....⁴

In this sense, the main curatorial role is to ensure that the work is intelligible to a range of audiences. Hans-Ulrich Obrist believes that 'the twenty-first century curator is a catalyst – a bridge between the local and the global'⁵ and someone who builds pedestrian bridges from the art to many different audiences.

These multiple roles of identifying local practices, placing them within a national and international context and then elucidating those linkages and the ideas that flow from them for a range of audiences is the core of my practice as an academic, a critic and commentator, as much as it is in my work as a curator.

In the following chapters I detail my activities over the past twenty years to develop narratives around my work across these various fields of engagement and to open up a dialogue with the existing literature and critical practices that document and situate contemporary visual arts practice in Western Australia. I identify key theorists, critics and historians who have influenced, challenged and motivated me to investigate the contribution made by artists working in Western Australia from the first years of European occupation until the present, with a particular focus on the period since the Second World War.

⁴ Rachel Weiss (1999, pp.8-16).

⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist (2009, p.4).

Positioning Western Australian art practice within this larger history is a complex activity. It negotiates a pathway through national and international issues of cultural dependency which have constructed a centre-periphery model of cultural influence. Since the 1970s, there has been a great deal of debate about the nature of Australia's relationship to world culture and the perceived 'provincialism problem' described by Terry Smith.⁶ The 'provincialism problem' includes Australia's having been positioned at the periphery as a marginalised community defined by its relationship to the centres of world art.

This dependency theory of cultural activity is exemplified in the invidious 'cultural cringe' that has haunted Australian artists, and it was first enunciated in the 1950s by Arthur Angel Phillips:

We cannot shelter from invidious comparisons behind the barrier of a separate language; we have no long-established or interestingly different cultural tradition to give security and distinction to its interpreters; and the centrifugal pull of the great cultural metropolises works against us. Above our writers — and other artists — looms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon achievement. Such a situation almost inevitably produces the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe.⁷

Although Phillips thought this a positive influence that would enable Australian artists to measure their achievements against universal standards, thus protecting them from the evils of parochialism, the use of the term cultural cringe as a form of denigration caused him to write a rebuttal in the 1980s.⁸

Nevertheless, driven by a desire to be taken seriously outside our boundaries, there has been pressure to establish a local and national culture, prompted by successive landmarks of white settlement, from anniversaries of occupation to major (external) conflicts. But as Anne-Marie Willis notes:

To be taken seriously in the international arena, the local culture must operate within the same parameters and thus negate itself,

⁶ Terry Smith (1984).

⁷ A. A. Phillips (1988, p.77).

⁸ *Ibid.* (p.132).

getting caught in a double bind. In this way the provincial colonial culture is constantly in a position of deference to an acknowledged centre with a longer history, richer traditions, more accumulated expertise, more money and patronage and more highly developed means of cultural distribution.⁹

It is within this dependency model of cultural production that Australian visual culture has been previously defined as either a pale imitation of imported models or as a series of unique variations inflected with an 'Australian accent'.¹⁰ Seen within this model, Western Australian arts practice is further marginalised – peripheral to the periphery – and dislocated from both Australian and world centres of art production. Over twenty years ago Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen challenged this view in their important book, *The Necessity of Australian Art*.

An alternate interpretation of Australian art should be able to reveal the interdependent (not dependent) character of the relations between centre and periphery, in such a way that it is possible to glimpse through Australian art an alternative interpretation of twentieth century art.¹¹

In their extrapolation of how this might be achieved, they proposed an alternative model for examining the contribution of Australian artists working outside the centres of international culture. Central to this model was the examination of the “relation between the national forms or traditions and the 'international' form of the art market”¹² and a revaluation of local traditions and practices. They argued that within this framework of uneven exchange the cultural value of regional practice is denied.

Burn and his colleagues called for a ‘revaluation of local traditions and practices, in particular a revaluation of the distortions and different understandings overlaid upon a historically-specific social environment’.¹³ While proposed as a way of examining the modification

⁹ Anne-Marie Willis (1993, p.129).

¹⁰ See Bernard Smith (1962).

¹¹ Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen (1988, p.132).

¹² *Ibid.* (p.132).

¹³ *Ibid.* (pp.132-133).

and, at times, invigoration of Australian art practice in its dealings with international markets, this lens is also revealing when it is focused on the interactions between Western Australian art practice and its interactions with Australia centres of cultural production. The inequality of the Australian/international exchange the above authors detail in their book has many resonances within Western Australian/Australian exchange experienced over the past 180 years. While a great deal of Australian art was bought for public and private collections and many exhibitions of Sydney-based and Melbourne-based artists were brought to Perth, little work by Western Australian artists was purchased for major national collections: very few exhibitions of work from Western Australia were shown outside the State.

The exclusion of Western Australian artists from publications surveying national trends or activity was another consequence that further exacerbated the situation. All history, as Raymond Williams suggests, involves a 'selective tradition'¹⁴ which requires acknowledgement of the process of selection to determine how those decisions are made. Whether seen in the wider sphere of Australian art in its relation with international practice or seen solely within Australia, the selective tradition, if not constantly examined, can skew interpretation, mystifying and obscuring the complexities of these relationships and the contributions of those on the periphery.

The writing of Burn and his colleagues was very influential in framing my research into Western Australian visual cultural practice. That research was driven by my belief that the need for a new understanding of regional values in Australia and of their historical basis in Australian culture was not simply a question of historical accuracy or of elucidating the role of influential regional practices on the development of Australia art. It was, more importantly, a question of the necessary condition of contemporary understanding and practice. The regional sensibility

¹⁴ Raymond Williams (1976, pp.202-10).

represented not only an historical component within a particular artistic ideology, but also a ‘consciousness displaced’.¹⁵

My contemporaneously published books, journal articles and exhibitions explored the work of Howard Taylor, Elise Blumann, Joan Campbell, Eileen Keys, Miriam Stannage, amongst other locally based artists. My research trajectory was to examine the regional context that shaped the practice of these artists by tracing the impact of modernism on their practice and assessing how cultural agencies, such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the art market and even major department stores, contributed to a unique variation of modernist visualisations. This interrogation of the importance of cultural modes of production (such as modernism) within Western Australia was re-assessed within the context of the differing social, economic and political conditions of modernity experienced in Western Australia. Thus its contribution to the wider picture of Australian cultural modernity had to be considered from a different perspective. As Burn and his colleagues reiterated, an important element within a cultural dialectic is diminished when the significance of regional practice is devalued. These are ideas I return to in more detail in the following chapters when discussing *The Artist’s Rottnest, Cinderella on the Beach: A Source Book of Western Australia’s Visual Culture* and *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure*.

This thesis proposes a new history of Australian and Western Australian art, one that emphasises its international character rather than its national or regional one; Rex Butler recently provided another such reading in his *History of UnAustralian Art*.¹⁶ His proposition is that international connections in Australian art were the foundation upon which local practice developed and that previous art historians, such as Bernard Smith, Robert Hughes, Christopher Allen and Andrew Sayers, concentrated on giving expression to some ‘essentialised’ local character in the production of art in Australia. Butler comments on

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (p.144).

The Necessity of Australian Art, saying that, although the authors criticize this interpretive framework, they do little more than change the focus from a passive assimilation of overseas influences to a dialogue with them.

I will return to Butler's criticism more fully in my conclusion, for now I wish to emphasise that during the 1980s this position, elaborated so persuasively by Burn et al., provided a practical framework within which the contribution(s) of local practice could be reviewed. My writing and curatorial activities, examining the role of the State's visual culture in constructing a local identity within the larger construct of Australian identity, was guided by the position Burn et al. articulated. In my books, numerous published articles and book chapters, I examined the possibility of interpreting local culture as a vital and constitutive element within this wider picture in order to subvert the notion of a hegemonic contemporary culture emanating from the larger Australian eastern and southern seaboard capitals and, indeed, from the centres of Paris, London, New York or, more recently, Shanghai and Beijing.

The degree to which Western Australian artists have constructed their own variant of international and Australian culture (or have simply reproduced it) has been a central theme in my work for twenty years. It led to my investigation of the 'Cinderella Syndrome', which balances a sense of Western Australia as hopeless and neglected against a deeply held conviction that the State will prosper and prevail. These contradictory positions have been invoked over the past 160 years since European settlement, as a reason for the State's failures as much as for its successes, so much so that they have become imbedded within the local psyche.¹⁷ This dichotomous stance by artists and critics also epitomises the tensions that have been reflected in the acceptance

¹⁶ Rex Butler (2006).

¹⁷ In the introduction to an edited volume of essays on arts and culture in Western Australia titled *Farewell Cinderella: Creating arts and identity in Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Geoffrey Bolton acknowledged that the title was a response to my book *Cinderella on the Beach* but argued that the 'Cinderella Syndrome' no longer has currency in the 21 Century: 'Western Australia has arrived at the ball-but not without a struggle' (2003, p.1).

and/or rejection of models of cultural production such as modernism and post-modernism.

In *Cinderella on the Beach*, I argued that, while initially Western Australian visual culture was developed from imported models (an endlessly repeated vernacular), the visual culture of Western Australia since 1945 arose from local conditions such as time-lags, geographic distance and the peculiarities of the physical and social environment that engendered a critical practice that modified and re-structured imported models of cultural production. In developing these ideas, the notion of 'Critical Regionalism', proposed by Kenneth Frampton, was an important catalyst, because, as he explains: "The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place".¹⁸

For me, this idea of a localised critique of imported modes of cultural practice, one that developed from the particular conditions of living and working in a specific place, resonated with the theoretical position championed by Burn, as well as George Seddon's concept of a 'sense of place'. Burn articulated this position as a process of constructed mediation:

for peripheral cultures, the mediation of influence may also be a constructed and self-conscious process, ... The points of mediation represent an intersection of different cultural histories and interests, a locus of strategies of exchange and transformation, of dominance and resistance. To encourage a dialectical exchange between discrete artistic cultures, no matter how similar, different, powerful or otherwise, the self-conscious process of negotiation and interruption of influence is vital. At the margins of modern art, this constructed mediation animates an important mode of critical practice.¹⁹

One example Burn points to is the reliance on reproductions that required from Australian artists a highly inventive re-interpretation of

¹⁸ Kenneth Frampton (1983, p.20).

¹⁹ Ian Burn (1991, pp.203-204).

the limited information available to re-construct and re-imagine the key works of international influence. This 'self-conscious process of negotiation and interruption' is in evidence across the country. But it is nowhere more so than in the most distant communities who lack a critical mass of practitioners (or other networks) to provide support and encouragement. Western Australian artists were aware of international activity in the arts and in the 1930s and 1940s re-imagined it, using the small black and white reproductions available to them to interpret the place they inhabited. As Burn points out: 'In these marginal contexts, the significance of other "meanings" in relation to particular styles is revealed'²⁰ and the overlay of this re-interpretation of international sources onto the peculiarities of place enabled a highly creative re-shaping and re-imagining of those sources and of the local environment.

Seddon is a major contributor to discussions about landscape and its significance in constructing a sense of national identity, and his writings on 'sense of place' are congruent with those of both Frampton and Burn. Indeed, Seddon argues a similar position of immersive reaction: being in a place and understanding its character is a foundation for interactivity. While Frampton and Burn posited the belief that the margins were fertile ground for creating innovative interpretations of received ideas, interpretations that could then feed back into the national or international cultural grid, by focusing on the ways in which this unique viewpoint was formulated Seddon provided a means of understanding how this process might operate.

Establishing a connection to an alien environment where nothing is familiar, accommodating or welcoming requires an enormous creative leap, which Seddon describes as taking 'imaginative possession',²¹ a process that enables individuals to become rooted in a place and make it their own. This is also a form of constructed mediation because as Seddon makes clear, 'an environment becomes a landscape only when it

²⁰ *Ibid.* (p.209).

is so regarded by people, and especially when they begin to shape it in accord with their taste and needs'.²² That notion of taste is at the core of processes of mediation. The activity of bringing inherited and adopted cultural assumptions and expectations into contact with the actual conditions of life in a new place generates responsiveness and interactivity that encourages on-going critique.

From this cauldron of activity, new modes of practice emerge. So, rather than locating the hybrid cultural forms developed by these regional artists as merely stylistic variants of a mode of cultural production initiated elsewhere, *Cinderella on the Beach* shifted attention away from notions of style and aesthetics to an examination of visual culture as a response to politics, social and economic conditions and local knowledge. In it, I examined specific examples of works by individual visual artists and groups of artists to question the orthodoxy that the work of Western Australian visual artists until the Second World War contributed to the construction of a cultural practice that was conciliatory rather than challenging, that was self-consciously parochial and that privileged objects and environments over human beings.

In both *Cinderella on the Beach* and *The Artist's Rottnest* the role of the landscape in constructing a sense of local identity was examined as a significant part of this process of taking 'imaginative possession' of an unfamiliar land (as was its role in promoting reconciliation²³ for those displaced from their original homelands). I agree with Mary Eagle, in her essay 'Grounds for a Visual Culture', published concurrently with *Cinderella on the Beach*, that the landscape in Australia carries an extraordinary weight of meaning:

It seems that Australia's claim to possess a regional culture rests heavily in the landscape. Even our national character (so-called) is merely a reflection of our landscape. The antipodean landscape is characterised as arid, weathered, unsympathetic, un-nurturing. In particular the bleaching, flattening light has

²¹ George Seddon (1994, p.xxxv).

²² *Ibid.* (p.111).

²³ Joyce Gray (1993, p.64).

been claimed as unique to Australia. Accordingly the people are said to be dry, with weathered skin and worn bodies, incommunicative, unsentimental, enduring, lazy, irreverent, and with a deadpan, if macabre, sense of humour.²⁴

Before the Second World War the Anglo-Saxon influence was paramount. After the war, the tide of migration produced a different set of conditions for art practice in Western Australia, as well as elsewhere in Australia. The fusion of cultures is apparent in the work of non-Anglo-Saxon migrants, who, in the process of taking 'imaginative possession' of this place, grafted their own cultural heritage onto the existing history of 'white' interaction with the extraordinary landscapes of Western Australia. In the process, they contributed to a hybrid cultural landscape that accommodated and blended these traditions. In support of James Clifford's proposition that 'cultural hybridisation is a generalisable condition of modernity',²⁵ Anne-Marie Willis suggests that:

Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performance from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols and languages.²⁶

It is from this patchwork of fragments of cultural forms that artists have fabricated a local culture. Ironically, their practice became almost a precondition of visual arts practice in the late twentieth century.

Appropriation, hybridisation, fragmentation and *bricolage* (making use of whatever is at hand) were the orthodoxies of Postmodernism that were re-appropriated by the centre from the practice of the periphery. As Burn pointed out:

The issue for peripheral cultures is not about precedence; rather it is about the appropriation by the centre of qualities, which have been characteristic of the peripheral cultures. These appropriations are then represented in forms integrated into the practice and critical vocabulary of the centre. In other words, they are quoted back to us as 'news', as the latest advancement of the centre. By such means, the illusion is retained intact: the

²⁴ Mary Eagle (1990, p.11).

²⁵ *Ibid.* (p.32).

²⁶ *Ibid.* Anne-Marie Willis quoted by Mary Eagle (p.32).

art of peripheral cultures reappears as a mirror held up to theories 'specific' to the centre.²⁷

The multiple ways in which previously existing modes of practice are re-configured in the works of artists arriving from outside Australia, as well as those born here seeking their lost cultural heritage, has been a significant focus of my work over the past twenty years. In part, my approach has been influenced by the work of the French theorist Gerard Genette. In his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*,²⁸ he analysed and classified literary works to highlight the complex ways in which one text is echoed within another. The palimpsest is, according to Genette, a form of 'transtextuality' comprising the ways one text refers to another through citation, plagiarism and allusion, when one text is united within another without being cited, when a text refers to types of discourse, modes of enunciation and literary genres that transcend each individual text, and, finally, when what he describes as 'hypertextuality' occurs, when one text depends upon another for its existence though it doesn't speak of it (such as Joyce's *Ulysses* debt to Homer's *Odyssey*).²⁹

The sense of displacement or transformation of other visual 'texts' (artworks) proved very useful in developing my understanding of how Howard Taylor and Pippin Drysdale constructed their working methodology and how this process contributed to the construction of a vital and critical practice. Previous interpretations by critics and public institutions sought to promote the notion that local visual culture is merely a pale reflection of a more significant culture located elsewhere.³⁰ I was more concerned with highlighting their innovative and imaginative transformation of existing cultural forms, thus providing an alternative interpretation that offered a new reading of the visual culture of Western Australia. Genette's ideas of citation, quotation,

²⁷ Burn (1991, p.214).

²⁸ Gerard Genette (1997).

²⁹ John Lechte (1994, p.61).

³⁰ See the 'Critics' section in Ted Snell (1991).

allusion, displacement and transformation resonate when confronted with the work of Taylor and Drysdale.

Although Genette was not specifically referenced in either Taylor's or Drysdale's book (his work focused on literature and poetry in particular), their process of finding a voice to describe the extraordinary visual environments they inhabit was clarified by his classifications. For instance, Taylor's citation of the works of Paul Nash, encountered while he was a student in Birmingham and then invoked when re-settled in Western Australia to make sense of the natural environment in the context of European modernism, was implicitly referenced in his work thereafter. Taylor was attracted to Nash's re-interpretations of found natural elements and used his anthropomorphist approach in constructing his 'Object-personages' to understand and interpret form in the Western Australian landscape. Nash described his process of projecting meaning onto found objects, or discovering the meaning residing within, as follows:

Henceforth, Nature became endowed for me with new life. The landscape too seemed now possessed of a different animation. To contemplate the personal beauty of stone, leaf, bark and shell, and to exalt them to be principles of imaginary happenings, became a new interest.³¹

Looking at the engraved plates of fossil impressions, it seemed to me these delicate, evocative forms could be revitalised in a particular way. I made a series of drawings of ghost personages, which showed them in the environment they naturally occupied in pre-history.³²

This activity of re-imagining inanimate fragments of the natural world, giving them a new life and a privileged status as representatives of Nature, led on to works such as *Forest Figure* in 1977, later assimilated and re-presented by Taylor in *Weathered Jarrah* twenty years later.

For ceramicist Pippin Drysdale, the photographs of Richard Woldendorp and the paintings of Aboriginal artists she met, most notably Garagarang

³¹ Paul Nash, quoted in Andrew Causey (1980, p.247).

Queenie McKenzie, Makinti Napanangka and Kitty Kantilla, were an initial impetus to construct linear networks around her vessels to invoke the geological and topographic forms of the landscape and evoke both the changing seasons, times of day and also to its ambience and mood. Once cited, this imagery became integrated into her vocabulary. The vessels of Drysdale's *Tanami* series from the 1990s and the more recent *Kimberley Series*, begun in 2007, without directly quoting the work of Indigenous artists or directly referencing Woldendorp's work, have become a singular and identifiable voice eloquently contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the landscapes of the North West of Western Australia. This complex process of 'transtextuality' provides a framework for understanding the contribution of Taylor, Drysdale and many others in Western Australia who absorb already existing artworks (texts) and then modify them through their interactions with the actual conditions (both physical and social) in which they work.

The focus on the landscape and the meaning it carries, as highlighted by Mary Eagle, is examined in more detail in *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure* and *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*. Both artists have based their practice on an intimate involvement with the natural environment they inhabit, not only as content and subject matter but also as the source of their raw materials. In these monographs, as well as in essays published concurrently with my research, I further examined the abiding myths, perceptions and assumptions about the role of landscape in the construction of Australian culture. An article co-written with Robert Cook, published in *Craftwest*³² in 1996, discussed landscape as the central inspiration for many local craft practitioners and its role in negotiating a sense of self in the world. The article claims that the picturing of landscape plays a vital role in forming our attachment to place, and that this is a significant function for people displaced from their natural homelands.

³² Paul Nash quoted in Anthony Bertram (1955, p.285).

We explored the above ideas through an analysis of George Seddon's notion of 'sense of place' and also identified other important positions adopted by local artists. For instance, we examined the use of the land and nature in Western Australian art practice to make gender positions appear neutral and inevitable and the return to 'Nature' appear a return to pre-determined laws of harmony and congruence. We stressed that each of these positions needed to be understood as cultural spaces, as ideas that emerged from cultural perspectives rather than from any pure 'given-ness' of the land. We urged that by

combining this wide-eyed wonder and openness to landscape with a critical distance to the forms of appropriation of the land. ... It is important to remember that to 'stake a claim on the land' is to 'stake a claim on ourselves', and even more important to remember that this claim is one that has shared cultural repercussions that are intimately involved with issues of gender, class, race and ecology.³⁴

Taylor and Drysdale are artists who understand this complexity. They offer a model of practice that provides insights into the ways in which artists working outside the major cultural centres can contribute to current debates that inform contemporary understanding. A failure to account for the specific character of art production away from the 'centre' has led to the problems associated with existing accounts and with the accepted interpretations of past artistic practices. As indicated earlier in this exegesis, the aim of my writing over the past twenty years has been to shift attention away from notions of aesthetics toward an understanding of the hybrid cultural forms developed by these regionally based artists as individual and highly original responses to the political, social and economic conditions that shaped them.

In the following chapters I focus on how these issues have shaped my research into the history of Western Australian art. Chapter Two examines how the work of George Seddon, and in particular his ideas of 'sense of place' and 'imaginative possession', provided the framework

³³ Ted Snell and Robert Cook (1996, pp.8-10).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

to develop case studies that explore the possibility of identifying a sense of 'localness' in the work of Western Australian artists. Informed by the debates around provincialism and regionalism led by Terry Smith in Australia, and influenced by Kenneth Frampton's conviction that it was possible to embrace current international ideas while retaining a sense of locale and tradition, over the span of fifteen years I presented a number of studies based on specific sites. The first site was Rottnest Island off the coast of Western Australia.³⁵ The second was Darlington, an artist's colony in the hills east of Perth. Later, I focused on Perth's Swan River as well as the Kimberley, a region in the northwest of the State. In each of these case studies I examined how individual artists responded to locale, what influences they brought with them and how they modified and transformed their ideas through direct engagement with the environment they encountered.

The historic precedence that contributed to local ambivalence over the virtues of isolation is explored in Chapter Three. My book, *Cinderella on the Beach*, focused on locating the work of Western Australian artists within contemporary society by providing a full cultural context within which to situate their practice. It was one of a number of books written during the late 1970s and 1980s, a period of increased curatorial and art historical research by museum and gallery professionals and academics. Sparked by the State's sesquicentenary, the renewed interest in history and the revision of previously accepted interpretations (based on consensus and harmony) led to many publications that made Western Australians aware of the complexity of their past. During this time, my works questioned the more conservative notion of a 'glorious isolation' and the concomitant 'localism' that promoted the fiction of a stable, secure and harmonious community. I offered a vision of a vibrant community of artists who critiqued international ideas from their unique vantage points.

³⁵ An island off the coast of Western Australia, Rottnest was the proposed site for the Western Australia's first township in 1829. Shortly after it became a prison for the Indigenous inhabitants and in 1907 it was declared 'a park for the people' and became a holiday destination for many Western Australians.

The shift of emphasis in local art historical research from more general histories to accounts of the specificity of individual practices is examined in Chapter Four. Within a framework of discussion about the relevance of the artistic monograph it was important to raise their profile at a time when many Western Australian artists were being excluded from publications and exhibitions. In this chapter I discuss the issue I personally faced in structuring a monograph on Howard Taylor: the framing of a more rigorous analysis of the contribution of other local practitioners. As well as providing a critique of other contemporary attempts to document Western Australian art and artists, I discuss my influences in developing a curatorial thesis for several major exhibitions that developed themes generated from my research. Throughout, my central theme focuses on the creation of a balance between received knowledge, a distinctive way of seeing and the individual responses to the familiar experiences of place by significant local artists.

The theme above is developed further in the final chapter but with a specific focus on the crafts and the work of Pippin Drysdale. To provide a context for Drysdale, the situation of the crafts as a popular, though somewhat marginalized, mode of practice, is discussed within the wider narrative of local art and the contribution of key figures such as Joan Campbell and Robert Bell. A contentious area explored in this chapter is the role of landscape in developing this unique vision and its impact on setting priorities that have shaped the development of the crafts in Western Australia.

The final chapter presents a recapitulation and discussion of the significance of this body of work as a critical case study of broader significant debates undertaken nationally and internationally over the past three decades.

The Artist's Rottnest

Imaginative possession

George Seddon's central presence in any discourse around landscape in Australia, and most particularly in Western Australia, was established on the bedrock of his book, *Sense of place: a response to an environment, the Swan coastal plain Western Australia*.³⁶ In it, Seddon introduced the notion of 'sense of place' as a way of overcoming the narrow scientific focus of geography as previously practiced by his colleagues. His integrative approach brought new insights into the ways in which landscape could be understood and interpreted. Although he warned that this term might become a catch phrase and be used as 'a way of legitimising a set of personal and subjective evaluative criteria as if they had some externally derived authority',³⁷ the idea holds considerable currency as a way of conceptualising the history of Western Australian visual arts practice. Combined with the notion of *genius loci*, the principle that 'an environment becomes a landscape only when it is so regarded by people, and especially when they begin to shape it in accord with their taste and needs',³⁸ Seddon provided the intellectual and structural foundations for a case study intended to ascertain if there was, indeed, a clearly identifiable 'localness' in the work of visual artists working in Western Australia.

In a 1983 essay on Rottnest Island, Seddon examined the social and cultural history of the island, which helped me identify a possible site on which to build a case study.³⁹ His lively prose and abundant insights led me to question whether further elaboration of these ideas about a generation of artists' visual images of Rottnest might not provide further insights, at the same time serving as a framework for understanding the wider contexts within which Western Australia's visual culture had been formed. A case study based on visual

³⁶ George Seddon (1972).

³⁷ George Seddon (1997, p.106).

³⁸ *Ibid.* (p.111).

³⁹ George Seddon (1983, pp.34-40).

representations of Rottnest was feasible because of what Seddon described as the island's 'legibility' – the fact that it can be easily comprehended physically and intellectually because of its proximity and scale: 'the best islands are perhaps those you can walk around in a few days',⁴⁰ he added. Nevertheless, interpreting these various representations of the island was complicated by its diverse history and usage. Whose images were they? Who were they for and who determined their form? The answer to such questions ultimately determined what various audiences saw and what they identified as having significance.

Revealing examples of this process are a set of early images of Western Australia presented in 1985 by Gary Dufour, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He curated an exhibition of drawings produced by Richard Atherton Ffarrington between 1843-1847⁴¹ and held in the Gallery's permanent collection. When confronted with the botanical oddities of eucalyptus, zamia palms and grass trees and the unfamiliar physical characteristics of the Indigenous people, Ffarrington responded with interest and accuracy, recording what he saw and describing in pencil drawings the people and the environment he encountered. However, Ffarrington knew full well that those images would be unintelligible to a British land-owning, ruling class audience accustomed to rolling parklands and oak trees. These patrons would nevertheless be familiar with Rousseau's conception of the 'noble savage', of proud individuals living in harmony with their environment. As a consequence, Ffarrington opened up the scrubby undergrowth in his watercolour paintings and visually installed pathways where none existed, replaced the scant eucalypt foliage with a dense canopy of leaves and ennobled the Aboriginal occupants with red capes, elegant hats and grandiose gestures. Whose place was this?

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (p.36).

⁴¹ Gary Dufour (1984). Richard Atherton Ffarrington was a soldier who recorded the local inhabitants and the landscape around King George's Sound during the first years of European occupation of Western Australia.

In the pencil drawings Ffarrington described an 'Aboriginal lifestyle', but in the watercolours he detailed a fictive European arcadia, only intelligible to an educated upper class audience familiar with the history and culture of Western Europe. In that context, the reasons for these modifications are understandable. But what effect did these images have in England at that time? Unlike many of the artists who recorded Australian content during the early years of British contact, Ffarrington seems to have constructed a thesis alternative to the more popular notion of *Terra Nullius*. These proud figures obviously own this land and hence it is not available for vacant possession by Ffarrington, his soldiers, nor the settlers who were to follow. His images raise interesting questions about sense of place. In particular, they elaborate the central motivations for making pictures about the landscape and they underscore the importance of his attentiveness to the audience who would read the image.⁴²

Images of the land have been made in response to several basic conceptions of humanity's involvement with its physical environment and the most pervasive of these is ownership. The issue of who owns the land is crucial. Is this *our place* or *their place*? Once ownership is established, profitability becomes a major concern and when the direct relationship to the land has been finally ruptured, city dwellers begin to establish notions of belonging through their understanding of the landscape, forging a spiritual or emotional connection with their environment. It becomes *my place*.⁴³ In Seddon's words:

The 'pastorale' is an expression of urban culture and the countryside so celebrated has always been seen from the security of a hobby-farm, from which the writer does not have to draw full sustenance, and to which he is not chained'.⁴⁴

Through an examination of selected paintings, drawings and maps of Rottnest, I sought to address these issues and to discuss their role in the

⁴² Ffarrington was aware that the wealthy, educated audience for his watercolours was likely investors in this commercial enterprise of establishing a new colony and that land ownership was a crucial component in its success. His images were therefore a counterpoint to the view of the land as empty and ready for purchase.

⁴³ For an extended discussion of these ideas see Ted Snell (1991b, pp.24-29).

construction of a sense of place as understood by urbanised, late twentieth-century Indigenous and non-indigenous Western Australian residents.

I began my research with a focus on European interpretations of the island, beginning with the early Dutch explorers and an interrogation of William de Vlamingh's appellation, 'Terrestrial Paradise'. However I soon realised that the history of incarceration and punishment, as well as the more significant issues of ownership and custodial responsibility, meant that I had to begin my study with an acknowledgement of the island's Indigenous history. This re-framing was extremely important. The discovery of Jack Davis' play *Kullark*, in which the Aboriginal leader Yagan describes the passage of the Warrgul or Rainbow Serpent creation spirit into the sunset and his marking of that journey – 'Two rocks you left to mark your passing'⁴⁵ – became a starting point that appropriately recognised the significance of Rottnest and Garden Islands in the cultural life of Western Australia's Indigenous Nyungar people.

To explore how artists established that sense of connectedness with the land, I appropriated another of Seddon's core ideas – 'imaginative possession'. Through distillation and assimilation of ideas into a culture we come to a deeper understanding and sense of belonging. He suggests that 'at best, our rights are custodial. True possession must be earned: that is, possession by the imagination'.⁴⁶ It was this process of taking imaginative possession that I attempted to chart in the work of Indigenous and European artists catalogued in *The Artist's Rottnest*. Although the ownership of the land by its Indigenous inhabitants is indisputable, contemporary Nyungar artists were forced to undertake a similar process of imaginative possession because of the loss of so much of their culture following the arrival of Europeans. There were so few historical images of the island by its Indigenous owners that even Davis

⁴⁴ George Seddon (1991, p.20).

⁴⁵ Jack Davis (1982, p.12).

⁴⁶ George Seddon (1994, p.xxxv).

had to re-possess the landscape through his poetry and prose. Indeed, Nyungar contemporary artists working in all artistic disciplines have been forced to adopt imported cultural frameworks and models to replace what been lost.

Artists such as those from the Carrolup School based near Katanning in the State's South West in the 1940s and 1950s, also needed to take 'imaginative possession' of their land. The paintings of those 'simple children of the bush'⁴⁷ were extremely important in redefining and reinforcing connections back to 'country'. With little remaining of the traditional visual modes of representing the land available to these children, they modified the conventions of the Roman School of landscape painting to reclaim their country or 'Nyungar boodja'. These conventions were associated with the French artist Claude Lorraine and introduced to the children by their teacher, Noel White. Coincidentally, it was the same tradition that informed the early non-Indigenous artists like John Glover, William Westall and Frederick Garling, who sought to make sense of the unfamiliar landscape they encountered in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. For the children at Carrolup, however, it was a tool they adapted to imaginatively repossess the land they had lost.

This sense of loss was poignantly described through the choice of sunset and nocturne themes that evoke a melancholic mood. Their paintings of the cleared land before it was divided off by fences and sliced by roads, as well as the corroborees they depicted, were from an earlier time. One of the few positive outcomes of the policy of segregation that created places like the Carrolup Native Settlement was the children's closer contact with their Elders who passed on traditional knowledge of corroborees and other important cultural information. These extraordinary drawings were imbued with this traditional knowledge and with a sense of connectedness to country that is immediately

⁴⁷ See Mary Durack Miller and Florence Rutter (1952).

discernible in their attention to detail, their careful modulation of colour and their narrative intent.

As Seddon proposed, both Indigenous and non-indigenous artists shaped the landscape of Rottnest ‘in accord with their taste and needs’,⁴⁸ so the analysis of their works provided the opportunity to explore how this process was materialised into a uniquely local expression of place. This familiarity and knowledge that grows from ‘intimate experience and love’⁴⁹ of place is encapsulated in Guy Grey-Smith’s painting of the salt-lakes at Rottnest as seen from the Lodge, and used as the cover image for *The Artist’s Rottnest*.

Rottnest, 1954-1957 was the final result of these studies. Begun back in his Darlington studio, it proved to be a difficult work to resolve and remained in a ‘state of becoming’ until 1957 when he was able to incorporate the ideas of Matisse and the Fauves that he had earlier seen at first-hand. This influence is particularly evident in the vermillion red addition to the blue underpainting of the sky, reflected back in the salt lake, which gives the painting an extraordinary quality of oppressive heat. The stark simplification of the distinctive flora into black, rhythmic cones and circles, and the direct, almost crude handling of the paint, echo the Fauvist concern for a totally expressive picture.

According to Matisse: *The simplest means are those which enable an artist to express himself best. If he fears the obvious he cannot avoid it by strange representations, bizarre drawing or eccentric colour.*

By focusing on the familiar terrain of Rottnest, Guy Grey-Smith found new equivalents for its unique forms, which, although inspired by European models, become assimilated into a local cultural context. The influences of Ceri Richards, Paul Nash, and Graham Sutherland’s Welsh landscapes from the forties are also evident, but the resulting image transcends its influences and in its vigour and freshness creates a new schema for a uniquely local experience.⁵⁰

As Seddon suggests, the process of taking emotional ownership of the landscape through an experience of place came about through an intellectual and imaginative assimilation of ideas and influences.

⁴⁸ George Seddon (1997, p.111).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (p.xxxv).

⁵⁰ Ted Snell (1988, p.118).

Another important stimulus for this project was the work of Kenneth Frampton, whose essay, 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism',⁵¹ explored how local manifestations of culture, in this case architecture, could both embrace current international ideas and yet remain true to its sources. According to Frampton, 'how to revive an old, dormant civilisation and take part in universal civilisation'⁵² was the dual challenge for architects working regionally. 'A region may develop ideas. A region may accept ideas. Imaginations and intelligence are necessary for both'.⁵³ It was this powerful sense of being both an imaginative interpreter and assimilator of ideas, as well an originator of them, that resonated with my own explorations of the work of Western Australian artists.

In my published essays in *Australian Art Review*⁵⁴ and *Art and Australia*⁵⁵ on the contemporary practice of locally based artists, in my exhibition and catalogue essay on the narrative tendency in local practice,⁵⁶ in my contribution to the book on Joan Campbell⁵⁷ as well as in essays on Miriam Stannage,⁵⁸ Theo Koning,⁵⁹ Michael Iwanoff,⁶⁰ John Beard,⁶¹ and George Haynes,⁶² I argued strongly that these artists were making an important contribution to Australian visual culture. Their work was not only rooted in a particular locale and informed by current ideas generated both nationally and internationally, but it was also inventive in its interpretation of these ideas. In part, I argued that this originality grew from an intimate relationship with place (as Seddon suggests), a point that Frampton reinforced when drawing the distinction between a commitment to place rather than space:

⁵¹ Kenneth Frampton (1983, pp.147-162).

⁵² *Ibid.* (p.148).

⁵³ *Ibid.* (p.155).

⁵⁴ Ted Snell (1983, pp.46-48).

⁵⁵ Ted Snell (1979).

⁵⁶ Ted Snell (1987b).

⁵⁷ Ted Snell (1984).

⁵⁸ Ted Snell (1982).

⁵⁹ Ted Snell (1985a).

⁶⁰ Ted Snell (1995b).

⁶¹ Ted Snell (1986a).

⁶² Ted Snell (1989a).

If any central principle of critical regionalism can be isolated, then it is surely a commitment to *place* rather than *space*, or, in Heideggarian terminology, to the nearness of *raum*, rather than the distance of *spatium*.⁶³

It was through this understanding of local conditions, combined with an acute awareness of what was happening elsewhere, that local practitioners were able to create work that assimilated the particular conditions and experiences of this place and to locate it within a wider framework and tradition that was intelligible to their audience. The early history of visual interpretations of the scrubby coastal landscape of Rottneest was an example of how this dual task was adroitly performed.

The framework for discussion of local practice was also constructed in response to the debate about the nature of Australia's relationship to world culture. In particular, the 'provincialism problem' was a vibrant, often-heated, exchange carried out through journals and in public gatherings that sought to establish the possibility of envisioning an Australian avant-garde. In his revisions for the second edition of *Australian Painting*, published in 1971, Bernard Smith addressed the potential of Australia to move from a province to a metropolitan centre where the cultural dynamic 'depends less and less for the creation of its art and its standards upon other centres'.⁶⁴ Following Patrick McCaughey's 'Notes from the Centre: New York',⁶⁵ Terry Smith responded with his influential article, 'Provincialism in Art' in *Quadrant*.⁶⁶ These ideas were developed in Smith's *Artforum* essay, 'The Provincialism Problem', and became the focus of a great deal of argument and debate. Smith's point was that local accents or inflections were

often the result of efforts to wed local traditionalisms to newly imported features. But because the traditions are likewise hybrids, the mixture grows weaker. Struggling on in the hope that *the situation* will somehow change seems to be the lot of the

⁶³ Frampton (1983, p.162).

⁶⁴ Bernard Smith (1971, p.334).

⁶⁵ Patrick McCaughey (1970).

⁶⁶ Terry Smith (1971).

provincial artist. The crucial point remains that, outside the metropolitan centre, the individual artist is not himself the agent of significant change. Larger forces control the shape of his development as an artist.⁶⁷

Whilst an enthusiastic advocate of some forms of local practice, in particular the work of artists associated with the Central Street collective in Sydney, Smith saw such work as a provincial branch of an international style. He took the view that, while it attracted some interest from international critics, artists had so far failed to 'lift their art into an international context'.⁶⁸ In light of Seddon's notion of 'sense of place' and Frampton's 'critical regionalism', I was keen to argue for a more reciprocal relationship along the lines explored by Ian Burn in his essay 'The re-appropriation of influence'⁶⁹ and Humphrey McQueen in his *The Black Swan of Trespass*.⁷⁰ In the latter, McQueen asserted that modernism had 'emerged' rather than arrived in Australia.⁷¹

Burn argued that to re-read and re-value Australian art it was essential to understand the relationship between the periphery and the centre. He advocated research into moments within Australian art that illuminated that relationship, along with concurrently examining how the particular historical circumstances within Australia had created the potential for such a re-reading. To provide an example, he analysed the impact of Fernand Léger's work on Australian artists in the 1940s and their mediation of his influence in constructing a highly innovative interpretation of his work within a local context:

for peripheral cultures, the mediation of influence may also be a constructed and self-conscious process. This may be taken as evidence of the acceptance but also a need to culturally distance the sources of influence. The forms of mediation, of distancing, are a means of self affirmation and function as a critical space within the complex process of influence.⁷²

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* (p.50).

⁶⁸ Terry Smith (1970).

⁶⁹ Ian Burn (1991).

⁷⁰ Humphrey McQueen (1979).

⁷¹ As others have pointed out, most notably Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen (1988), the book fails to provide a coherent framework within which to examine the particular forms in which modernism 'emerged'. The powerful linguistic substitution of a proactive and engaged sense of participation and collaboration provided additional impetus for my re-examination of local practice.

⁷² Ian Burn (1991, p.203).

This notion of a critical space seemed closely aligned with Frampton's re-framing of the debate around artists on the periphery being both interpreters and assimilators of ideas and was a powerful catalyst for me to explore the practice of artists working in Western Australia.

While exchanges on the nature of the provincialism and regionalism proliferated within Australia, it was nevertheless true that the hegemony of Sydney and Melbourne remained unquestioned. Publications continued to appear claiming a national survey with titles that grandly promised an examination of '*Australian Sculpture Now*'⁷³ and '*Contemporary Australian Printmaking: An Interpretative History*'.⁷⁴ There was little or no representation from Western Australia and most often no artists from Tasmania, the Northern Territory or South Australia. Invisibility was one of the major problems for locally based artists in these regions. Not only were they not included in exhibitions and books that documented Australia's visual culture, but even locally there was little examination of their practice. It was this lack of representation that inspired an early exhibition project I proposed to the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) Art Acquisitions Committee for its annual Invitation exhibition in 1982.

*The Foulkes Taylor Years*⁷⁵ was proposed as a mini-survey of an important period in the 1950s and 1960s when artists and designers worked in tandem to introduce new ideas from Europe in order to build a vibrant local community that both appreciated and supported contemporary art and design. It was also an attempt to redress the imbalance in scholarly research that had previously excluded artists from Western Australia. As explained in my introduction to the catalogue:

In the past five years there has been a remarkable increase in the number of publications and journals elaborating aspects of

⁷³ Graeme Sturgeon (1984).

⁷⁴ Sasha Grishin (1994).

⁷⁵ Pat Duffy, Anthony K Russell and Ted Snell (1982).

Australian art and culture. This renewed interest in the art history of Australia has manifested itself in: numerous retrospective and review exhibitions, a rash of artists monographs, much scholarly research into aspects of Australian culture (published in an ever increasing number of journals), and several important books dealing with the crucial periods in the development of Australian art. It is therefore unfortunate to note that so little of this new energy has been directed towards the recording of art and culture in Western Australia. From Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* to Richard Haese's *Rebels and Precursors*, WA artists and their milieu have received only scant attention. This is then an auspicious time to look more closely at the art and cultural history of Western Australia.⁷⁶

Under my direction, the research undertaken by Pat Duffy revealed a rich seam of material that offered up opportunities for further research and eventually led to the publication of *The Artist's Rottnest* and *Cinderella on the Beach*. A number of articles on local practitioners, both historical figures and contemporaries, appeared in *Art and Australia*, *Pottery in Australia*, *Praxis M*, *Tension*, *Art Network* and other national journals. In place of a comprehensive history of Western Australian Art,⁷⁷ *The Artist's Rottnest* was also an attempt to provide an overview and a sense of the scope and achievement of local practitioners.

The publication of my book in 1988, the year Australia celebrated its Bicentenary, led others to begin exploring the notion of locale and sense of place in relation to other sites,⁷⁸ and also spurred me on to use a similar approach to examine the impact of visual representations of Darlington and its surrounds.⁷⁹ *Darlington and the Hills* was an exhibition, catalogue and accompanying video documentary that charted the sense of connectedness artists, writers and architects felt to the landscape of the Darling Ranges just east of Perth.

Escape to a simpler more natural environment, a 'better place' where the humours are revived and the creative spirit can

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* (p.5).

⁷⁷ There is still no comprehensive history of Western Australian visual culture, although Art Gallery of Western Australia catalogues and other publications, including some of my own, do form a patchy and discursive history. The most recent is Arthur Spartalis (2008).

⁷⁸ To name two of the better examples: Jane Hylton (1998); Rodney James (1999).

⁷⁹ Ted Snell (1990a).

blossom, has long held an attraction for jaded city dwellers. According to Robin Juniper, quoted in an interview advertising the fourth annual Darlington Arts and Crafts Exhibition, the atmosphere itself is regenerative and an impetus for creative activity. 'Living in the hills is good for the creative spirit', she explained and the large number of artists who settled around Darlington created a rural Greenwich Village or Chelsea. It is this notion of an 'artist's colony' that attracted many individuals to Darlington and the hills area both as practitioners wishing to share in the creative environment and as an audience, seeking the excitement that supposedly emanates from the bohemian lifestyle.⁸⁰

Although both publications and their accompanying exhibitions explored different sites, many of the same artists were included, and together they contributed to a wider understanding of the impact of specific conditions and environments to a generation of local practice. It was a theme I returned to in 2000 when I curated the exhibition, *Haynes to O'Connor: Western Australians and Water*. This time, the meeting place of water and land, the sea and the river, was used as a site to explore Western Australian's relationship to water and its importance in the construction of our sense of identity.

Haynes to O'Connor: Western Australians and water is not a definitive study of local artist's responses to the presence of water in our natural environment or a complete catalogue of the significance of water to the inhabitants of this place. Instead it aims to pose questions and to make some observations about the importance of our proximity to water, both its ubiquitous presence and its absence, in establishing our sense of identity. With the prospect that water will maintain its vital role in establishing who we are it is worth pausing at this juncture to assess how we have shaped our vision of ourselves around this key element. As the population multiplies and the demand for water increases, will those with a garden be amongst the elite who can afford to pay for the water to maintain it? Will access to beaches and rivers be restricted as the demands increase and will more people be encouraged to live away from the coast where the omnipresent waves 'sound the beginning and ending of (their) circling days', because, if so, then our image of ourselves as inhabitants of this place will change again.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *Ibid* (p.6).

⁸¹ Ted Snell (2000a).

Critique of existing modes of thought and action is a part of the process of taking imaginative possession. For Indigenous and non-indigenous artists, this was an important aspect of their practice. In my article, 'Jimmy Pike and Kimberley Regionalism', I argued that Rover Thomas, Jimmy Pike, Paddy Tjamitji, Jarinyanu David Downs, Garagarang Queenie McKenzie, Jack Britten and Peter Skipper (among others) had made a significant contribution to the wellbeing of their communities by maintaining the ceremonial life and documenting the traditional cosmology and creation narratives through their paintings and prints.

The success of Rover Thomas and Jimmy Pike is evidence of the viability of addressing crucial issues while speaking from a position of local knowledge and for them and other Kimberley-based artists the regional character of their work has become both a significant point for marketing for their products and also for their wider concerns. Despite the voracious appetite of white Australian culture, which seeks to consume what is distinct and significant from the other culture, Aboriginal artists like Pike have continued to speak articulately about the conditions of their people, their involvement with the land and their concerns for the future, and through their commercial success they are reaching an every increasing audience.⁸²

In 2005, I returned to these ideas when asked to write a catalogue essay for the exhibition of work by four Western Australian jewellers who had all travelled to study or work nationally or internationally and had recently returned⁸³. Across the seventeen years from my first discussion of sense of place and critical regionalism in relation to local visual arts practice, I was struck by an urge to re-establish roots back to 'this place', an environment that resonates emotionally and intellectually, that provides inspiration and the raw materials for artistic craft. Writing on the practice of Helen Britton, Sarah Elson, Bronwyn Goss and Carlier Makigawa for the Home Ground exhibition at FORM I explained:

Their engagement with locale, with the place in which their lives and that of those they care about are set, is both introspective and all encompassing. By necessity it needs to be rooted in a personal experience of place and informed by an understanding of

⁸² Ted Snell (1995c).

⁸³ Ted Snell (2005c).

what it is to be resident here, but, like Blake pondering a grain of sand, it can also contain the universe and provide an insight into our place within the cosmos.

Coming to terms with 'this place' is the first step in gaining that deeper understanding. We need artists, writers and poets to provide us with the parameters of vision that enable us to see and comprehend the raw material of the environment and shape it into landscape. Then we need them to explore and explain how this place influences us, how we interact with it, how it makes us feel and what spiritual and emotional qualities it engenders. It is a quest driven by personal needs and desires but the outcomes benefit us all as we learn what it's like to be Western Australians, to live in this environment and to negotiate our place in the world.⁸⁴

I followed this in 2008 with a chapter titled 'Framing Fremantle' in *Fertile Soil: Fifty Years On, The City of Fremantle Art Collection*. Here, I explored the idea that 'the narratives that unravel from the artist's framing of the situations before them and the viewer's reception of the work generates a range of perspectives on a place and its people'.⁸⁵

Seddon suggests 'an environment becomes a landscape only when it is so regarded by people, and especially when they begin to shape it in accord with their taste and needs'.⁸⁶ This is an ongoing process that is documented in the work of artists, writers, poets, musicians and architects. The following chapter looks at the background to these attitudes that have been so influential in shaping Western Australian practice, as well as at the ways in which distance was configured by local artists as either a liberating membrane or a stultifying barrier to cultural production. By changing the lens to shift from a conservative historical viewpoint to a more open and encompassing panorama that situates local art within a wider social, cultural and political context, major shifts in attitude over the past quarter of a century can be explained. In so doing fresh insights into the role of Western Australian

⁸⁴ Ted Snell (2005c).

⁸⁵ Ted Snell (2008).

⁸⁶ George Seddon (1997, p.111).

artists in enriching and expanding ideas of a national identity is illuminated.

Cinderella on the Beach

Glorious Isolation

During the research for *The Artist's Rottnest*, I uncovered a great deal of material at the Battye Library, the archives of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and from the records of a number of private individuals. Much of this material was unused in my final book, yet it presented a picture of Western Australia as a community that was unsure about its identity. Ambivalence about the virtues of its geographic isolation led to conjecture about the social, cultural and economic benefits and detriments that had accrued because of it. A recurring epithet was 'Cinderella State', adopted by Western Australians as both a defense mechanism and a statement of pride. The positive aspect is invoked in Henry Charles Prinsep's 'Ode on the Jubilee of Western Australia', written in 1879:

Of all her Southern sisters only she
Without diadem of gold is found,
Alone in all the bright throng content to be
With simple wreath of vine and olive crowned.
She paces slow, but she moves the ground.⁸⁷

The key elements in this reference to Cinderella encapsulate many of the early constructions of local identity. Beauty, independence, possession of a free spirit, conservative, unique but also successful are ideas invoked to explain aspects of the Colony's attractions and attributes. But for early settlers such as Thomas Peel (1793-1865), who stood on the beach south of Fremantle in December 1829 surrounded by all their possessions, with no sign of the cultural life they had left behind, cut adrift and left to fend for themselves in an alien environment, the other aspect of the Cinderella story would have come more sharply into focus.

The colonists, quite unconscious of the future that lay before them, carried out great numbers of costly, very often unsuitable articles. ... [I]t was found difficult to convey this property to the town and much of it was left to rot on the shore where carriages,

⁸⁷ Ted Snell (1991, p.13).

pianos and articles of rich furniture lay half buried in the sand and exposed to the alterations of sun and rain.⁸⁸

‘On the beach’ would have been a very poignant notion for Peel, implying a rupture with the past and nervous apprehension of the future. With the publication of Neville Shute’s *On the Beach* in 1957, that reading was inverted; Australia was re-imagined as the final safe zone after nuclear war. *Cinderella on the Beach* was therefore a descriptive title that sought to encapsulate the dichotomy that exists for Western Australians when contemplating their isolation or perceived isolation. From the earliest days of the colony, European settlers and visitors demonstrated an undiminished capacity to invoke either reading of the Cinderella story to significant issues relating to the State. With cultural matters, it was generally assumed that the defensive position should be applied, while the glories of isolation were regularly argued as key factors in sporting and financial success. These attitudes persisted in all aspects of Western Australian society but they are particularly relevant for the arts.

During the nineteenth century, it was universally agreed that all local arts activity was rather weak, nothing more than a provincial copy of imported models from Britain. Yet by the late 1980s, a rising consciousness that the ‘periphery’ could provide a unique vantage point led some Western Australians to reassess the value of isolation.⁸⁹ In his foreword to an exhibition of work by six local sculptors at the Praxis Gallery in 1985, the curator, Julian Goddard, documented those benefits:

Parochialism is a mode. It produces modes of self-consciousness and deception, but it allows us a buffer, a barrier of protection from the bombardment of colliding and collapsing cultures. So while we receive, we are far enough away not to receive at all. We have the space to breathe and watch and choose.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ C.T. Stannage (1979b).

⁸⁹ See my earlier discussion on Terry Smith’s essay ‘The Provincialism Problem’ in Chapter 2 of this exegesis.

⁹⁰ Julian Goddard (1985).

In this instance, the glorious isolation of the State is used to explain the diversity of approach amongst younger artists⁹¹ who, when freed from the necessity to conform to dominant theories or trends, were able to work with unfettered originality.⁹²

Cinderella on the Beach attempted to document the shifts in interpretation of the value or dangers of isolation in constructing a cultural identity. Divided into four sections, the book chronicled local attitudes and also the issues faced by artists, critics and institutions from the earliest years of white settlement to the penultimate decade of the twentieth century. It aspired to a final review of the scandals that reflected some of the undercurrents of anger and frustration that remained unresolved. Beginning with the artists who wrote back to England of the difficulties they encountered in depicting an alien environment, where everything seemed reversed (the leaves stayed on the trees and the bark fell off), the primary texts, when compiled together, presented a picture of a group of intelligent and well informed individuals who were trying to earn a living from their craft while simultaneously exploring ways of intellectually and emotionally appropriating the place they now inhabited.

For artists working in the twentieth century, the mediation of modernism through largely British sources was one filter; the arrival of that information via word of mouth (or in small black and white reproductions) yet another. Making sense of this material required an act of great creative interpretation for artists living in an isolated city, weeks away from Europe by sea and days away from Sydney and Melbourne by train. They did so by applying their creative imagination. Rooted in local experience, they shaped this received knowledge into highly original forms of practice that reflected their personal

⁹¹ This is a continuing practice. See Paul McGillick (2006, p.16): 'what stands out (in international design) is the fact that the finest design invariably grows out of a sense of place, exploiting local materials within a rigorous design practice. This suggests, far from being an obstacle, distance from the world design hot spots ought to be a huge advantage, enabling designers to develop an authentic language and offer work with a clear point of difference'.

engagement with their environment. Though it is still distant, Perth is no longer isolated. In the first 150 years of European occupation it was both; the conditions of life created from that reality had a major impact on the ways in which cultural practice developed.

The critics in section two of my book provide more barbed responses, arguing from positions ranging from a parochial self-satisfaction to an embarrassing inferiority. But they too reinforced the importance of the artist as a mediator able to interpret the unfamiliar landscape.

Beauty surrounds us, but too often we cannot because we will not see it. Our converse with nature must be at first through an interpreter, and though poets and prose writers have done much to translate nature's message, their best efforts, even those of Ruskin himself, fall far behind the revelation of a great picture.⁹³

While some critics believed that foreign influence was detrimental to the construction of an identifiably localised vision – 'We in Australia are far from the Centres and so our artists can develop along their own lines and develop a national art'⁹⁴ – others were convinced that 'he knows not Art which only Australian knows'.⁹⁵ These attitudes were further developed in the third section of my book, which describes the establishment of government-funded and privately-established institutions that fostered the visual arts.

The early institutions founded to promote art in Western Australia were by their very nature mostly conservative and well meaning. Public support grew slowly from a base of private philanthropy and interest. Such a small community had few alternatives. Yet from the earliest years there was a remarkable optimism about the potential of the State to produce work of quality that encapsulated a local flavour or inflection. Not surprisingly, most of the discussion focused on the key cultural institution, the Western Australian Art Gallery, or, as it

⁹² Indeed, I used the same argument to present the work of six young Western Australian artists to a national audience in 'The Virtues of Isolation!' (1985).

⁹³ *Vigilans et Audax*, in Ted Snell (1991a, p.63).

⁹⁴ T.W. Meagher (*ibid.*, p.75).

⁹⁵ *A Common Man*, (*ibid.*, p.76).

became, the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The Gallery provided the bureaucratic superstructure for the visual arts for most of its one hundred year history,⁹⁶ though the institution has not always fulfilled that role to the satisfaction of the arts community—it even returned budget allocations to the Treasury rather than purchase local works for the collection.⁹⁷ To highlight the difficulties faced by artists and their supporters in generating a sympathetic climate that would encourage the arts and cultural activities, the scandals detailed in the final section of my book document the public discussion of the role of the arts in a community which held other firmly established priorities.

My compilation of primary sources was an important contribution to the concerns about documenting a local art history. Research into Western Australian art practice had begun with curatorial research by staff at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and was boosted by the establishment of the Centre for Fine Arts at the University of Western Australia. Indeed, there was a relative flood of publications and exhibitions during the 1980s exploring the history of visual arts practice in Western Australia. Barbara Chapman's *Colonial Eye*⁹⁸ in 1979, was followed soon after by our work at WAIT in presenting *The Foulkes Taylor Years*. After those publications came David Bromfield's *Paintings and Ceramics by John Barker*⁹⁹ and *Elise Blumann: Paintings and Drawings*,¹⁰⁰ Anne Gray's *Line Light and Shadow*,¹⁰¹ Roderick Anderson's *Western Australian Art*,¹⁰² David Bromfield and Julian Goddard's *Aspects of Perth Modernism*,¹⁰³ my book *The Artist's Rottnest*, Janda Gooding's *Western Australian Art and Artists 1900-1950*,¹⁰⁴ Tom Stannage's *Embellishing the Landscape*¹⁰⁵ and my *Cinderella on the Beach* in 1991.

⁹⁶ His Royal Highness the Duke of York laid the foundation stone for the Western Australian Art Gallery in Beaufort Street in 1901.

⁹⁷ See Alan Vizents, 'Hall of Mirrors: The West Australian Art Gallery 1950-1957', which details the history of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, in David Bromfield (1988), pp.61-72.

⁹⁸ Barbara Chapman (1979).

⁹⁹ David Bromfield (1984a).

¹⁰⁰ David Bromfield (1984b).

¹⁰¹ Anne Gray (1986).

¹⁰² Roderick Anderson (1986).

¹⁰³ David Bromfield and Julian Goddard (1986).

¹⁰⁴ Janda Gooding (1987).

¹⁰⁵ C.T. Stannage (1990).

One reason for the resurgent interest in chronicling the history of local arts practice was the sesquicentenary of the State in 1979, which focused attention on the history of the former Colony and State. Funding was provided for major projects, such as that undertaken by Barbara Chapman and curatorial staff at the Art Gallery of Western Australia to research an exhibition that would document pre-colonial and colonial history:

we need to have a better understanding of artistic development in this state prior to our own time if we are to achieve a real measure of self-knowledge. Now that 150 years of European settlement are behind us, we should be able, through the perspective of time, to see more clearly the causes and influences which have shaped this vital aspect of our heritage; how the environment has influenced artists and to what degree art has affected the lives of people and the course of our development as a state.¹⁰⁶

The objective of self-knowledge and the acknowledgement of the foundations of local arts practice and, in particular, the need to understand the external influences, the impact of the environment and the affect of the arts in shaping social and economic change were recurring themes in the work of local historians during the late 1970s and into the 1980s.

Tom Stannage, writing in the introduction to his book on the work of local artists Fred Flood and Amy Heap, provided an overview of these approaches. He began with the State's two leading historians, F.K Crowley and Geoffrey Bolton, but Chapman was identified as the first to 'harness Western Australian art history to general history'. Stannage continued:

Scholarship in the 1980s has generated more questions than answers about the nature of the Westralian experience. Put another way, the art historians, like the general or social historians, have made Western Australians more aware of the complexity of their past.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Chapman (1979, p.5).

¹⁰⁷ C.T. Stannage (1990, p.16).

Stannage argued for a more expansive reading of local history, one that shifted interpretation away from the ‘consensus, harmony, open social mobility’¹⁰⁸ seen in the work of the established historians, toward a reading that revealed its ideological base. In particular, he pointed to Janda Gooding’s exhibition and catalogue, *Western Australian Art and Artists 1900-1950*, as a major contribution to the re-conceptualisation of local art history. Gooding explains in her catalogue introduction:

Rather than try to explain Western Australian art by that which did not occur, I feel it is more fruitful to assess the work that was produced against the backdrop of the society which mediated the activities, absorbing and repelling ideas and attitudes to produce an overlay of harmony, continuity and consensus.¹⁰⁹

The 1930s were a period of radical intervention centred on the Worker’s Art Guild, but, as Gooding points out in the conclusion to her chapter on that period, Western Australian society ‘quickly sought to protect itself from internal as well as external threats, artistic activities that opposed the established conventions were easily marginalised in this climate’.¹¹⁰ By reproducing various primary source documents that illustrated these debates and the processes by which the dominant ideology of the State was able to construct a seamless identity of harmony and consensus, *Cinderella on the Beach* contributed to this re-interpretation of the history of the State’s visual culture.

Another central theme in Gooding’s catalogue and exhibition was, not surprisingly, the ways in which cultural and geographic isolation contributed to the development of local visual arts practice – whether or not this separation imbued it with a regional flavour or ensured it remained a parochial copy of British culture and east-coast Australia. By showing how many artists (particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century) had travelled and corresponded with colleagues outside the State, she debunked the myth that geographic isolation and

¹⁰⁸ Stannage had previously discussed the extent to which the dominant ideology of consensus had subsumed dissent in *The People of Perth: A Social History of Western Australia’s Capital City* (1979), published for the State’s sesquicentenary.

¹⁰⁹ Janda Gooding (1987, p.10).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* (p.62).

poor communications had acted as a restraint on local artists. At the same time, Gooding revealed how the notion of ‘glorious isolation’ had been perpetuated, leading to a defiant form of ‘localism’ that proposed the benefits that accrued from separation and necessary self-reliance. As previously discussed, this idea was further elaborated in *Cinderella on the Beach* and the tensions encapsulated in the book’s title were reflective of a concurrent interest in this fundamental theme that underpinned all discussions on the development of Western Australian visual culture.

Perhaps most significantly, Gooding and other colleagues researching local art history at the time were attempting to break with the previous pattern of focusing on individuals: ‘isolated from their contemporaries and the society in which they participated’ and instead chose to survey ‘visual arts practice and locate it in the breadth of a full cultural context’.¹¹¹ This was certainly the impetus behind the work of the Centre for Fine Arts, established at the University of Western Australia. David Bromfield had been appointed as the Director of the Centre and, through his own research as well as that of his students, he sought to situate local practice within the wider context of the State’s and the nation’s social and economic history.

Bromfield’s objectives for the new Centre were outlined in an article written for the newly established journal, *Praxis M*. He explained that, in articulating the history of Western Australian art, ‘art and culture will be represented in their true role within the development of Western Australian life as a whole’.¹¹² Western Australia was, in his belief, ‘the last cultural trade free zone in the Western world’ and hence free of the cultural hierarchies – ‘those miserable appendages of power’ – that stifled art practice in Melbourne and Sydney. As a consequence, Western Australia was the perfect place to re-imagine art history as ‘the

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* (p. 8).

¹¹² David Bromfield (1983, p.13).

critical exposition of the development and current possibilities of visual culture’:

There is a particular problem with European art history, so rich in method and inextricable from the development of visual culture here, yet so prone to decay into a hierarchical sequence of isolated immobile masterpieces frozen for all time under tons of prose like dry ice. Yet perhaps a cultural trade free zone is the place to rediscover and recreate that history as a cultural instrument.¹¹³

Although highly critical of aspects of many locally based contemporary artists, Bromfield did acknowledge the quality and originality of artists working in previous decades:

It is certain, however, that we shall never appreciate their achievement until the specific circumstances under which they worked are known and articulated as clearly as the history of the artists and their audiences in Sydney and Melbourne and that this will never be achieved if we are continually told that artists in Western Australia made little contribution to the development of art in Sydney and Melbourne.¹¹⁴

In his exhibitions and publications, Bromfield also promoted the work of a select band of contemporary artists whom he believed had succeeded in making ‘first rate art’. In the exhibition and accompanying catalogue for *Among the Souvenirs*, he explained that:

The exhibition associated with this book began as an investigation into the conditions under which it was possible for artists to live and work in Western Australia. It has ended as a celebration of artists who have succeeded in making first-rate art here and in a revelation of the attitudes and strategies which have made their success possible. Hopefully, this will encourage those who wish to see contemporary art here grow in confidence and originality¹¹⁵.

Despite his cavalier disregard for many artists who make a major contribution to local and national visual culture, his argument in support of a vital local practice rooted in the ‘specific circumstances under which they work’ was an important fillip to artists and critics alike.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* (p.12).

¹¹⁴ David Bromfield (1988, p.iii).

¹¹⁵ David Bromfield (1987, p.13).

It was within this climate of scholarly research, fuelled by a proselytising zeal to inform local and national audiences of the vitality and originality of Western Australian practice, that *Cinderella on the Beach* was conceived. Its major contribution was to open up the field of inquiry for further research by proposing a number of previously untrammelled avenues for scholars to follow. It also, as might be expected, provided a stimulus for further research. *The Artist's Rottnest* and *Cinderella on the Beach*, in tandem with the work undertaken by Chapman, Bromfield and Gooding, generated a renewed interest in the ways in which local practitioners had engaged with the landscape.

This line of argument was not without its critics. In the second edition of the journal *Praxis M*, visiting artist Juan Davila vehemently responded to the 'the concern for the landscape, the English influence and the love of surface in painting'¹¹⁶ he had encountered in the State with a polemic on the local obsession with the landscape:

The longstanding anxiety of Australians confronting the landscape indicates a problem of identity. The void of the land forced to signify, ignoring the suture that it offers. The emergence of the subject, of meaning, occurs through alienation and through a joke. The subject here is divided from its own language and disappears in a pun that is an approximation of the real.¹¹⁷

The counter argument was elaborated in the texts included in *Cinderella on the Beach* that described the ways in which landscape had come to signify and, as Janda Gooding had shown in *Western Australian Art and Artists 1900-1950*, at various periods been employed to mystify social relations in the name of harmony and the preservation of existing power dynamics. Additionally, local craft practice was undergoing a boom in the 1980s following the craft revival of the 1970s and a great deal of energy was being directed toward the natural environment as both a source of inspiration and of raw materials, though without as

¹¹⁶ Juan Davila (1983, p.25).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* (p.25).

much critical focus as was evident in the practice of other contemporary artists.

In my essay in *Joan Campbell Potter*, I discussed in some detail the role of the landscape in Joan Campbell's work and identified the modes of international practice through which she was able to interpret the landscape anew:

In essence, Joan Campbell's response to the landscape has been formed under the influence of the Australian visual tradition, though it has been tempered by a personal sensitivity to the natural forms of both the outback and the coastal plain. Stronger, though, than this inherited tradition has been her debt to international modernism and, in particular, to the American crafts movement of the 1950s and 60s.¹¹⁸

In response to Davila and in light of concurrent writing exploring responses to landscape, I investigated key local practitioners relationship with the landscape in order to understand how it was being employed by them and read by their audience. I explored the lack of critical perspective in a review of *Viewpoint '92*, published in *Craftwest* in 1992. Curated by Robert Bell, the exhibition showcased the work of craft practitioners living and working in the Great Southern Region of the State. In his catalogue essay, Bell concluded that the exhibiting artists 'reflected their association with the rich landscape and variety of lifestyles of the Great Southern Region'.¹¹⁹ But he failed to substantiate in what ways this association had impacted on their work, or in what ways they had reflected upon the discourses of viewing/living in the land, discourses that are politically founded and that mirror, reproduce and sometimes challenge our positions within cultural power structures.

When asked by *Craftwest* to contribute a 'philosophical essay' later in the same year, I chose to further explore these ideas in a article written in collaboration with my then PhD student, Robert Cook. The essay, 'Staking a claim',¹²⁰ sought to provide a critique of the 'landscape

¹¹⁸ Ted Snell (1984, p.33).

¹¹⁹ Ted Snell (1992b, p.13).

¹²⁰ Ted Snell and Robert Cook (1996, pp 8-10).

malaise' identified by Davila and discussed by numerous others over the intervening decade. It concluded with an exhortation to remain vigilant in the pursuit of a critically engaged practice:

Combining this wide-eyed wonder and openness to landscape, with a critical distance to the forms of appropriation of the land has become an increasingly important aspect of the work of local practitioners. Recent graduates from the University sector are very conscious of this dichotomy and the work of many local craft practitioners offer us critiques of our place in the world through the cultural representations of the land as a source of their inspiration. It is important to remember that to 'stake a claim on the land' is to 'stake a claim on ourselves', and even more important to remember that this claim is one that has shared cultural repercussions that are intimately involved with issues of gender, class, race and ecology. As such, the land as inspiration needs to be engaged with critically as a vital part of our constructions of contemporary subject positions.¹²¹

Other themes introduced in *Cinderella on the Beach* were elaborated over the following decades. I continued to research the theme of scandals in the Australian art world as a way of examining public attitudes to contemporary art, focusing on the disconnection that existed between the intentions and aspirations of the artists as well as the receptivity of their general audience. More importantly, these points of conflict between artists and their audience served as battlefields for broader and more significant political and social struggles.¹²²

In an extended article for *Art and Australia* titled 'Scandals and Scoundrels', I re-examined the major public reactions and media outbursts in Western Australia when confronted with contemporary art created locally or brought in from overseas. After riding the wave of the mining boom of the 1960s and finding international fame as 'the city of lights' after John Glenn flew overhead in Mercury 6 on the 20 February 1962, the same year Perth hosted the Empire and

¹²¹ *Ibid.* (p.10).

¹²² In 2005 I extended these ideas into a radio series for the ABC in which I examined various scandals from the history of Western Art and identified the central issues they elaborated from within the social and cultural milieu that spawned them. *Art Aside*, a series of twelve five minute programs for the ABC Radio National's 'The Deep End', was first broadcast in March 2005.

Commonwealth Games, the city's garden suburbs were stalked by a mass murderer, Eric Edgar Cook. The benefits of internationalism were obliterated for many by what they saw as its serious threats to their comfortable existence.

Whether to be international in one's outlook or to hold on to traditional values, that was the question. While the mining boom propelled Western Australia towards a shining international future, Eric Edgar Cook and that 'incomprehensible art' were reminders of the dark side of this new trend. Scandals and the scoundrels who perpetrated them did not merely represent an amusing sideline to the main game, but encapsulated the public's deepest fears about that future.¹²³

In place of the cohesive and supposed uncomplicated history of Western Australian visual arts practice that existed before the boom, local art historians, undertaking research projects funded under the auspices of the sesquicentenary in 1979, revealed the complexities initially identified in *Cinderella on the Beach*.

I also addressed the impact of migration and the policy of multiculturalism in changing the Western Australian cultural landscape in an essay for an exhibition titled *Memory and Identity* at PICA in 1989, curated by Marco Marcon.¹²⁴ In other articles on artists who had emigrated to the State, such as Harald Vike,¹²⁵ Elise Blumann,¹²⁶ and more recently, Karl Wiebke¹²⁷, I reiterated the importance of the influence of this cross-fertilisation from Europe. Other writers elaborated on this thesis in journal articles, catalogue essays, books and exhibitions during the dynamic decade of the 1990s, further contributing to the 'mosaic of artists and art, and their complex interrelationships with Western Australian society'¹²⁸ alluded to by Janda Gooding.

A decade after the publication of *Cinderella on the Beach*, Geoffrey Bolton, Richard Rossiter and Jan Ryan published a collection of essays

¹²³ Ted Snell (2000c, p.405).

¹²⁴ 'The Italian/ Australian Connection', *Memory and Identity*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989.

¹²⁵ Ted Snell (1990c).

¹²⁶ Ted Snell (1993).

¹²⁷ Ted Snell (1994b, p.298).

summarising past achievements in the arts and cultural activities of artists working in Western Australia, as well as anticipating future successes. In their introduction, the editors referenced the contribution made by my book. They took the opportunity to bid farewell to the defensive position taken on cultural activities I had reported.

That past, though capable of being re-fashioned by each generation for its own ends, can never be an absence, a blank slate waiting for its inscriptions. More than a decade ago Ted Snell, in his collection *Cinderella on the Beach: A Source Book of Western Australia's Visual Culture*, noted: "The epithet 'Cinderella State' is adopted by Western Australians as both a defense mechanism and a statement of pride. From the earliest days of the colony they carefully selected when and in what circumstances they should use the first or second position, although it was generally assumed that the defensive should be used in all matters relating to the arts. ... It is this defensive position that we now believe we can bid farewell to."¹²⁹

By sharpening the focus, Bolton et al. revealed greater strengths and more subtle and complex interpretations of local art practice. Viewing the scene from a greater distance and with a different agenda, Bolton and his colleagues identified a changing attitude to art-making across many arts-related disciplines in Western Australia. The research my colleagues and I had undertaken in the 1980s was the bedrock on which they were able to build their expanded theory of local practice and its growing maturity, sophistication and inclusiveness.

In the following chapter I examine the practice of significant local visual artists in order to ascertain how they constructed their working methodologies, and how they accommodated the tensions between working outside the major centres while remaining open to external influence. My closer focus on Howard Taylor and Arthur Russell, amongst others, provides an opportunity to penetrate to the core of these artists' work and to identify their inextricable linkages with the communities that supported them.

¹²⁸ Janda Gooding (1987, p.8).

¹²⁹ Geoffrey Bolton, Richard Rossiter and Jan Ryan (2003, p.1).

Howard Taylor: Forest Figure

Close focus

In the 1990s the focus of much research moved from more general studies of visual arts activity in Western Australia to an examination of the work and careers of individual artists. Evidence amassed by scholars of art over the previous decade of research¹³⁰ support the thesis that a number of significant Western Australian artists had formulated positions of awareness of, and resistance to, received ideas, and that this had generated a self-aware and critical local practice. In part, this change of focus in both my own research and art research more generally in the 1990s, was a way to test this hypothesis. It also arose from a desire to promote the work of Western Australian artists by discussing their work within a national context. Moreover, it was also true that researchers, including myself, had gradually honed the necessary research tools required to undertake such projects.

Since the 1971 publication of the second edition of Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*¹³¹ there had been a phenomenal increase in the number of books documenting the visual arts in Australia. Monographs and historical texts vied for shelf space with an increasing range of books surveying every aspect of arts production in this country – from collage to public art. Yet, despite their claim to being Australia-wide in scope, many writers ignored artists living outside the centres of Sydney and Melbourne. Christopher Heathcote's *A Quiet Revolution: The Rise of Australian Art 1946-1968*,¹³² only briefly ventured outside Melbourne for a few quick visits to Sydney and one to Brisbane, ignoring artists working everywhere else. There were others such as Ken Scarlett, Arthur McIntyre and Sasha Grishin¹³³ who promised a national survey but

¹³⁰ In particular, Barbara Chapman, Janda Gooding, David Bromfield, Anne Gray, Tom Stannage and Julian Goddard, as outlined in the previous chapter.

¹³¹ Following his ground breaking *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1945), the publication of Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (1962), examined the proposition that Australian art did not happen in isolation but came out of an exchange between a European vision and local experience.

¹³² Christopher Heathcote (1995).

¹³³ A great number of books were published in the 1980s and 1990s with titles such as *Australian Sculptors*, *Contemporary Australian Collage* and *Australian Printmaking* but with no coverage of artists living outside Sydney, Melbourne and occasionally Brisbane.

offered something much more parochial and localised. In this climate, it was essential to provide evidence that artists living outside the major centres of Melbourne and Sydney had built and sustained significant careers that expanded the knowledge base upon which an understanding of Australian culture was formulated.

In the period after the publication of *The Artist's Rottnest* and during the research for *Cinderella on the Beach*, I continued to serve on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Art and Australia*. In that role I proposed articles on leading contemporary Western Australian artists to supplement and embellish issues of the magazine that surveyed national themes and promised national coverage. From 1989 to 1990 I published articles on Douglas Chambers,¹³⁴ Nola Farman¹³⁵ and David Jones¹³⁶ in quick succession. These essays served their purpose of introducing artists working from a Western Australian base to a national audience. However, of necessity, they were cursory in their treatment and focused almost exclusively on current work.

During the research for *Cinderella on the Beach*, I generated a corpus of material that could not be accommodated within the final publication. Nonetheless, it was valuable in that it provided the basis for a more rigorous focus on entire careers. In particular, this included in-depth interviews with a number of senior local artists, including Arthur Russell.¹³⁷ Russell had been one of my teachers at Perth Technical School and at the Western Australian Institute of Technology when that institution separated from its parent to form an independent entity in 1967. His influence was of singular importance to me as well as for a large number of graduates from both institutions. Together with Sandra Murray, Director of the newly established Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia, we devised a project to present a retrospective survey exhibition of Russell's work, accompanied by an

¹³⁴ Ted Snell (1990b).

¹³⁵ Ted Snell (1990d).

¹³⁶ Ted Snell (1990e).

¹³⁷ Ted Snell and Sandra Murray (1991).

extensive illustrated colour catalogue that would situate Taylor's practice within its wider social and cultural context.

The project was conceived as part of a series of survey exhibitions of local artists that had been initiated by David Bromfield's previously noted exhibitions on the life and work of both John Barker and Elise Blumann. New impetus was also provided by the Art Gallery of Western Australia under the leadership of its new Director, Betty Churcher. In her Foreword to *The Work of Brian McKay* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Churcher announced the Gallery's intentions:

The exhibition represents the first in a determined series of exhibitions of work by living Western Australian artists. The Art Gallery of Western Australia accepts its responsibility to display and record the State's major achievements in the area of visual arts, and in so doing hopes to alert the people of Western Australia to the considerable contribution this State has made, and continues to make, to Australian culture.¹³⁸

Surveying Russell's entire career of (at that time) forty year's duration, provided the opportunity to focus closely on individual issues and concerns while simultaneously having the resources and the time to offer considered assessment of an entire body of work. I alluded to this strategy in my introductory remarks.

From the complex nature of artists' motivations for making art and the myriad choices involved in the practicalities of fabricating their art work, it is sometimes possible to discern a central core which guides them through a career which on the surface may seem highly discursive. It is the pole star that draws them on or acts as the final arbiter in decision-making, and while other concerns and issues may at times seem to usurp its centrality, a longer perspective reveals its guiding presence.

Standing at that 'still point of the turning world' you find, according to the poet T S Eliot in his poem *Easter Coker*, the dance where many possibilities present themselves, so it would be wrong to assume that every painting or drawing produced during a forty year period directly confronted this issue. Indeed such a reading would be far too simplistic; however, each body of work within his extensive oeuvre does contribute to his larger investigation of the underlying structures of existence.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Betty Churcher (1987).

¹³⁹ Ted Snell and Sandra Murray (1991, p1).

The retrospective catalogue was published during a period of great activity in the Western Australian art community.

In the previous four years, exhibitions by Douglas Chambers¹⁴⁰ and Brian McKay had been held at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, with two new monographs on Brian McKay¹⁴¹ and Robert Juniper¹⁴² published locally and nationally respectively. In response to these initiatives, *Arthur Russell – In Retrospect* was an attempt to encapsulate an artist's career but not to circumscribe it. Margaret Moore explained in her concurrently published essay on Douglas Chambers that: 'Whilst far from diminishing the work of his extraordinary career and artistic contributions so far, the insights and pleasures of this survey whet one's appetite. He has many more stories to tell'.¹⁴³ The process of constructing an exhibition thesis, undertaking the necessary research, selecting artworks to illustrate the thesis, sourcing those works and arranging loans and finally installing the exhibition to present a coherent narrative is a complex and difficult process made more difficult if shared.¹⁴⁴

As can be seen from the previous paragraphs, the increasingly competitive micro-climate of research that had evolved in Perth, led to a small number of curators, academics and postgraduate students staking claims on aspects of local visual culture and on individual artists.¹⁴⁵ While undertaking the research for *The Artist's Rottnest and Darlington and the Hills*, I identified a number of works by Howard

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Moore (1991).

¹⁴¹ Luceille Hanley (1992).

¹⁴² Phillipa O'Brien (1992) wrote the second monograph on the artist Robert Juniper, the first, was by Elwyn Lynn (1986).

¹⁴³ Margaret Moore (1992, p.15).

¹⁴⁴ Edward Fry (1972) listed three roles that define the curator's position: firstly, as "the caretaker of the secular relics of a nation's cultural heritage"; secondly, as "the assembler of an otherwise non-existent cultural heritage"; and thirdly, as "ideologue". In my work with the Lawrence Wilson Gallery in 1991, I was conscious of assembling together the elements of Russell's history and also intent on advocating the significance of his practice within the wider context of Australian Art. Being confronted with competing ideologies inevitably required compromise.

¹⁴⁵ David Bromfield laid claim to Elise Blumann and he and his students at the Centre for Fine Arts at the University of Western Australia identified the 1930s-1950s and the Workers Art Guild and leading figures within it as their particular area of research. Anne Gray chose the turn of the last century and the figure of James W R Linton to be the focus for her research. Others similarly identified a figure and/or period of the Colony or State's history as the core of their scholarly activity.

Taylor and began to take an interest in this almost mythic figure of local art practice who, since 1968, had chosen to live a reclusive life in Northcliffe, deep in the State's southwest. During this period, Gary Dufour was also researching Taylor's work for a major retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, to be held in 1985. Then, in the process of undertaking research for the Arthur Russell essay, I uncovered some fascinating insights into Taylor's teaching style. Russell was a student of Taylor's at Perth Technical School on his return to Perth in the early 1960s. As Gary Dufour had left the Art Gallery of Western Australia by this time and returned to Canada, I began to explore the possibility of undertaking an exhibition that would address an aspect of Taylor's practice that was only cursorily addressed in Dufour's exhibition and modest catalogue.¹⁴⁶

I had written an extensive essay on Howard Taylor's work for *Praxis M* in 1990 and, as I undertook more research for this and other projects, I was further convinced of the artist's importance in the development of an internationally relevant local practice. His work was not only a unique visual manifestation of the physical environments of Bickley in the hills outside Perth and Northcliffe in the State's south west, but it made a significant contribution to national and international discussions on the nature of contemporary abstraction.

For the past forty years Howard Taylor has been recording the nuances of light and colour in the sky and the bush around his studios in Bickley and Northcliffe in Western Australia. Sometimes these notations are direct transcriptions of places and events, at other times the process of distillation reduces the image down to a series of contained rectangles or a circle hovering within a rectangle. Whatever the final visual form, the problem is always the same: how to record the visual phenomenon he encounters everyday as he moves through the karri forest. ... This is not just a process of documenting the extraordinary forms he discovers because Howard Taylor is also fascinated by the mechanisms of perception and the ways in which these forms, and their associated visual phenomenon, are received by the human eye. ... The works, though essentially non-figurative, are created through a process of abstracting the

¹⁴⁶ Gary Dufour (1985).

essence of his experiences in front of nature and giving them concrete form.

I think I've been approaching the landscape as a direct, almost naturalistic way with my spontaneous drawings and little paintings. ... You can also come in the other side and start off with a few geometrical shapes, get some interest going in the way of movement, contradiction ... and lead it towards landscape. To go back to the other one, you can come in from the naturalistic way and refine it and reduce it and end up with an abstract work, but can start with an abstract work.¹⁴⁷

The breadth and scope of Taylor's work was largely unknown to a general audience because the major cultural institutions had not collected it. Although he had gained several major public art commissions,¹⁴⁸ the bulk of works in his 1985 retrospective had been drawn from his own collection and those of family and friends. The earliest work in the exhibition from a public collection (other than those donated by Dr Roy and Mrs Esther Constable to the University of Western Australia in 1978) was a work from 1963, acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia the following year.¹⁴⁹ The next work held in an institutional collection was from the Western Australian Institute of Technology, purchased in the early 1970s. This lack of depth in the collections of the major cultural institutions confirmed the importance of private patronage in developing professional careers in Western Australia. So a theme emerged for the proposed exhibition.

In Private Hands – Works by Howard Taylor, opened at the Erica Underwood Gallery, Curtin University of Technology¹⁵⁰ in 1992, and drew together an important group of works by the artist held in local private collections.

The twenty-two works in this exhibition cover a wide spectrum of Taylor's work from the fifties till the present and includes many

¹⁴⁷ Interview with the artist, quoted in Gary Dufour (1985, pp.25-26).

¹⁴⁸ The citizens of Perth would have come into frequent contact with Taylor's public art commissions sited along St Georges Terrace in Perth at the old Australia New Zealand Bank building and the Australian Mutual Provident building, to name the most prominent, but they were likely unaware of his name and would have had little or no knowledge of his sustained practice over five decades.

¹⁴⁹ The sculpture *Bushform* by Howard Taylor was purchased in 1964 following its exhibition in *Howard Taylor - paintings* at the Skinner Galleries, 2-7 December, 1963.

¹⁵⁰ The Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) was renamed Curtin University of Technology in 1987.

works which have not been seen in any public exhibition. Indeed the close support these collectors have offered Howard Taylor has meant that the works in their possession document aspects of his art that have become intimate, shared experiences. This opportunity to see paintings, drawings, sculptures and maquettes that have not been previously exhibited is a rare privilege and the works selected from the many pieces held in private collections have been chosen because they document the artist's working life in a way that has not been previously enunciated.¹⁵¹

Within the vibrant curatorial and art historical environment of Western Australia at that time, I was very conscious of the need to introduce Taylor's work to as wide a sample of the population as possible while retaining the notion of a meeting ground and being responsive to current debates as articulated by Rachel Weiss¹⁵².

One of these debates about the mythology of the artist was being explored locally by photographer Richard Woldendorp,¹⁵³ who was gathering material for a book that would provide a visual document of the practice of Western Australian artists. Working in tandem with John Stringer, curator of the Kerry Stokes Collection, the book, titled *Western Australian Artists in Residence*, was to be a selection of photographs of sixty contemporary artists in their studios, accompanied by a short text written by Stringer. He explained the book's rationale as Providing "contextual background to the creative legacy of the era".¹⁵⁴

Based on the parameters set by Lord Snowden's photographic essay on the British art world, *Private View: The Lively World of British Art*,¹⁵⁵ Alexander Liberman's photographic documentation of the major European modernist artists¹⁵⁶ and Peter Bellamy's similarly themed book on New York artists, *The Artist Project*,¹⁵⁷ the book may have been intended to provide a 'contextual background'; however, it failed by re-

¹⁵¹ Ted Snell (1992a).

¹⁵² Rachel Weiss (1999).

¹⁵³ See my review of the Woldendorp and Stringer's book and the accompanying exhibition held at PICA in 1995 (1996b).

¹⁵⁴ John Stringer, in Richard Woldendorp and John Stringer (1995, p.5).

¹⁵⁵ Bryan Robertson, John Russell and Lord Snowdon (1965).

¹⁵⁶ Alexander Liberman (1960; revised edition, 1988).

¹⁵⁷ Peter Bellamy (1991).

presenting the myth of the isolated artist in sixty slightly differing variants.

In Liberman's case, his long friendships with the artists was documented over many years and photographs of the artist in the studio were supported by reproductions of their work. Snowden had similarly focused on the artistic personality and, with great panache, conjured up the myth of the romantic bohemian. When Liberman and Snowden constructed their photographs, the myth of the heroic artist went unquestioned. Thirty years on, that myth had been systematically dismantled by a legion of critics and theorists.¹⁵⁸

Instead Woldendorp's photographs employed every conceivable cliché of the posturing hero – from the feet apart macho artist occupying his domain to the serious tradesman surveying work unconvincingly laid out on the studio floor for inspection. There were even a couple posed self-consciously astride ladders, awkwardly arranged within their studios in totally unpractical situations. Despite being located in their studios, the space they had created as a work environment and intellectual laboratory, they looked uncomfortable and out-of-place, even those with brushes in their hands were unconvincingly active. The selection of predominantly white Australian male painters and sculptors reinforced this mythology.

Nervously apologising for the selection he and Richard Woldendorp had made, John Stringer explained in his introduction to the book their reasons for excluding all but three Indigenous artists, those artists working in the crafts and all Western Australian photographers. It was because their inclusion 'would only have exacerbated the problem of space'. He added that 'Aboriginal artists ... have already been extensively published'.¹⁵⁹ These arguments were tenuous because, by limiting creative practice to the traditional fine arts, the book suffered from a very restricted field of vision, one that totally misrepresented the nature of contemporary practice in Western Australia. Similarly,

¹⁵⁸ For example, Paul Taylor (1982); Bernard Smith (1988).

the exclusion of Aboriginal artists such as Rover Thomas, Jack Britton, Garangarang Queenie McKenzie and Peter Skipper presented an unbalanced picture.¹⁶⁰ The excuse that they were better known was hardly credible because none of them was as well known as Robert Juniper, the subject of two published monographs, yet he was included. Most importantly, though, the book avoided making the obvious and very necessary connections between groups of artists working in a mutually beneficial relationship in this small community.

One of the most significant aspects about contemporary practice in Western Australia, and a major factor contributing to Stringer's claims for an identifiable 'regional identity', was the sense of community that linked these clearly identifiable and widely acknowledged groupings of artists. In 1962, when the charismatic George Haynes arrived in Western Australia direct from 'Swinging London', his colour-field painting, largely working from sources discovered within the landscape, influenced a number of his students at the Perth Technical College Art Department and later at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. Over the intervening three decades, the close tonal, high-pitched opaque coloured renditions of the local topography became a familiar and accepted vision of the State; and from his days of teaching at Perth Technical College and WAIT, Haynes amassed a group of followers whose motivations and ambitions mirrored his own. Jeremy Kirwan-Ward, Giles Hohnan and Nigel Hewitt are three of the better known and all were included in Stringer's book, *Western Australian Artists in Residence*. However, no connections were made between them and Haynes, nor with the expanded group of artists who had worked closely with him, such as Eveline Kotai, Jane Martin, Linda van de Merwe and Ben Joel, all of whom were excluded.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Woldendorp and John Stringer (1995).

¹⁶⁰ Indeed only two Indigenous artists were included in the final selection of sixty artists—Pantjiti Mary McLean and Roy Wiggan.

Another collaborative cohort was that which formed around Karl Weibke and Alex Spremberg, who had arrived from Germany in the early 1980s and had trained together in Germany under Franz Erhard Walther. The rigour of their approach resonated with numerous local artists whose enthusiastic response to the processes of fabrication and materiality Spremberg and Walther introduced prompted the deployment of similar strategies. Trevor Richards, Andrew Lesley and Jurek Wybraniec were all included in Stringer and Woldendorp's book. But once again, no connections were made, no local networks were identified and hence no evidence of the vibrant and engaged community that existed was documented. Additionally, the figurative sculptural tradition that grew up, initially around Hans Arkeveld and later associated with artists represented by the Gomboc Gallery, was another grouping well represented by its constituent members in the publication. But their inter-connectedness was ignored. The assumption was that each of these artists worked independently in their studios, summoned up ideas from their private experiences, unattached to the community that surrounded them or to the wider world of ideas and influences they encountered through their engagement with the art world.

My writing at the time took an entirely different course in an attempt to explain the self-aware and critical local practice that had been established in Western Australia. Its regional identity in fact sprang from this collaborative and reactive community of artists aware of external ideas and wanting to situate them within a local context. Seddon, Frampton and Burn and others had shown one of the most interesting aspects of any regional practice is the balance created between received knowledge, a distinctive way of seeing, and an individual response to the familiar experiences of place. Certainly, the works of the three groupings of artists listed above provide ample evidence of this. Yet in Stringer's text there is no examination of the social conditions under which these artists work, no discussion of how received knowledge was transformed by local experience and no

exploration of shared motivations or theoretical positions. By further perpetuating the myth of the isolated, self contained creative genius, *Western Australian Artists in Residence* avoided these key factors in the construction of local visual arts practice.¹⁶¹

Terry Smith pointed to the key factors facing artists working away from the centres of world art in an essay for a themed issue on regionalism in *Art and Australia*.

Can we not expect to find the limiting and oppressive effects of regionalisms (narrowness of outlook, conventionality of viewpoint, low horizons of experimentally, retreat from demanding content) coexisting with its positive aspects, that is, with valuable different ways of seeing the same place, seeing it as both yours and something other. The task for criticism, and for artists interested in self-examination becomes one of how to distinguish the operations of this structure in works of art and in the support structures themselves. How is it working destructively? Where is it creating new values?¹⁶²

Seeing a place as both ‘yours and something other’ was a powerful idea and for Howard Taylor it had a particular resonance. Taylor’s example did test the hypothesis, because it was clear from my research for the *In Private Hands* exhibition that he had been well supported by a band of dedicated collectors. In addition, he had taught at Perth Technical School as well as WAIT, where he had contact with the next generation of practitioners. Yet he had always worked independently from his peers. Nevertheless, the social conditions under which he had built his practice and his ability to transform received knowledge through direct experience of place did form the solid foundation for a more in-depth study of his life’s work.

¹⁶¹ Another group worth mentioning in this context is that of younger figurative artists who graduated from the School of Art, Curtin University of Technology in the mid-1980s and included Tom Alberts, Kevin Robertson, Richard Gunning, Andrew Daly, Yvette Watt Thomas Hoareau and Megan Salmon were all included in the Stringer and Woldendorp’s book while Mario D’Alonzo, Chris Malcolm, Christine Barker and Andre Lipscombe were not. The cross-fertilisation of ideas they generated enabled them to develop a strong figurative imperative in their work that was at odds with the current orthodoxy’s in the art schools in Western Australia at that time. Unfortunately there is no mention of this dynamic or the impact it had on local art production.

¹⁶² Terry Smith (1994, p.469).

At the same time, the debates around regionalism and the increasing interest in Australian art spawned a large number of individual survey exhibitions, retrospectives, monographs and themed exhibitions on aspects of Australian art.¹⁶³ A counter-position was being established within the theoretical journals that challenged this focus on the individual artist. The surveys of the previous decade and the catalogues that accompanied them,¹⁶⁴ as well as those that attempted to provide an overview of particular periods or modes of practice, had created a somewhat tenuous equilibrium between the notion that the meaning of an artwork could be discovered through an understanding of the artist's life and working methodology and the belief that the meaning of any artwork was socially constructed. In this changing climate there were many dissenting voices, raising questions about the value of focusing the discussion of contemporary practice around an individual artist's practice. According to Jonathan Holmes:

This debate was at the very centre of the editorial project that Paul Taylor set himself as editor of the fledgling art journal, *Art and Text*, in autumn, 1981. In his first editorial, Taylor drew upon the writings of Benjamin, Cage, Barthes and Venturi to challenge the view that the artist was the 'creator' of the meaning of a work, and to suggest that he or she was only one of the 'producers' of a work's meaning. He used Venturi's idea of the architect as 'selector' of ideas to develop a view of art that gave a significant role to the viewer or audience in the creation of the meaning of the work of art.¹⁶⁵

This critique of the 'authorial' voice of the artist needed to be balanced by the benefits gained from undertaking a more sustained investigation of an individual practice. So, although wary, I began the initial research for *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure* by preparing a *Catalogue Raisonné* of the artist's work.

Although most of the work was still in Western Australia, the task of tracking Taylor's paintings, drawings and sculptures after fifty years had elapsed was extraordinarily difficult. Many of his paintings and drawings were listed in early catalogues as nothing more than a title, a title that

¹⁶³ See Jonathan Holmes (2003) for a list of individual survey exhibitions presented in public galleries in Australia throughout the 1980-1990s.

¹⁶⁴ See Betty Churcher's (1989) comment on the importance of catalogues in developing national reputations.

changed if the work was unsold and re-exhibited. A lot of the work remained in the artist's collection and because Taylor was so focused on his current work that digressions into the past, the presence of strangers asking questions and measuring and cataloguing works in the studio was gruffly accommodated – to a point. Nevertheless, the cataloguing of the available information was finalised and placed on a database that enabled sorting of categories, identification of trends and the possibility of charting productivity against dates linked to locations. Amassing the fifty-year record of the artist's work provided a solid basis for making judgments. The contacts identified also contributed information through additional interviews I undertook that further extended the data upon which propositions and assertions were able to be assessed.

In response to the traditional monograph format that read more like a prospectus eulogising an artist's practice to promote sales¹⁶⁶ my methodical approach embedded Taylor's practice in the social, economic and cultural environment of Western Australia. I explained this in an article in *Art and Australia* that appeared a year before the book was published:

After five decades as an artist, Taylor continues to work quietly and relentlessly at the problem of recording the visual phenomenon he encounters every day as he moves through the Karri forest that surrounds his home and studio. With the engaged, objective focus of a scientist, he isolates specific events and structures that reveal the underlying patterns of the bush and, in the slow methodical practice that he has employed over the past fifty years, he then proceeds to document both the extraordinary forms he discovers and the process of perception that reveals them. It is a dual response that seeks to establish the connections between external stimulus and the process of receiving and decoding that visual information.¹⁶⁷

Taylor was not an easy subject for a monograph, not only because of the logistical difficulty in tracking his works, but also because he was a very

¹⁶⁵ Holmes (2003, p.7).

¹⁶⁶ Craftsman House Press produced a number of monographs in the 1990s that presented colour plates of an artist's work produced over past decades, with a preponderance made within the last few years, introduced by an enthusiastic 5,000 word overview of an artist's career.

¹⁶⁷ Ted Snell (1994, pp.474-480).

private man, happy to keep working in his studio seven days a week, eight hours a day¹⁶⁸ and not keen to look back or be diverted.

When I first approached Taylor to ask permission to embark on the project, he was reticent, to say the least:

The instant reaction was one of ‘fright’ – that there would be a great interference to and conflict with the peace and quiet of mind that I like to have. ... I do my best not to look back and to be not introspective. This is for you to keep in mind – it is most important.¹⁶⁹

All the same, after five years of intensive research and many trips to Northcliffe the book was finally completed and launched by the then Minister for the Arts, the Hon Peter Foss, MLC, on 14 March 1995 at the new Galerie Düsseldorf in Glyde Street, Mosman Park. Three weeks later, David Bromfield reviewed my book for *The West Australian*.

Despite the growth of interest in local art over the past decade or so there are almost no serious monographs on major WA artists. There are occasional coffee-table books and odd collections of biographical gossip. Rarely, however, has a writer set out to provide a readable, systematic account of the life and work of an individual artist. The monograph may be out of fashion but we desperately need more of them. This alone is sufficient reason to welcome Ted Snell’s ground-breaking study of the work of Howard Taylor.¹⁷⁰

In the years following the publication of *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure*, I continued to publish reviews and articles on Taylor¹⁷¹ and his contemporaries, Guy Grey-Smith¹⁷² and Tom Gibbons¹⁷³.

Upon Taylor’s death in 2001, I curated an exhibition at the John Curtin Gallery¹⁷⁴ and wrote an obituary for *Art and Australia* in acknowledgement of his extraordinary contribution.

Working in his studio just a few weeks short of his eighty-third birthday, with all the intensity and focus he had honed over six decades of commitment, planning yet another solo exhibition and

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* (p.476).

¹⁶⁹ Howard Taylor, letter to the author, 12 July 1989, reprinted in Ted Snell (2000b, p.13).

¹⁷⁰ David Bromfield (1995, p.7).

¹⁷¹ Ted Snell (2000b), and (2003, pp.58-60).

¹⁷² Ted Snell (1996a).

¹⁷³ Ted Snell (1999b).

¹⁷⁴ Ted Snell (2001a).

the completion of the re-building of a major public artwork for Curtin University of Technology, it was hard to imagine that anything could stop him. A fall and complications after an operation were the unexpected conclusion to a career that epitomised the most profound expression of artistic integrity and the highest professional standards.¹⁷⁵

Howard Taylor, like Colin McCahon¹⁷⁶ in New Zealand, proved unequivocally that serious art of international significance could be made outside the traditional centres of world art.

In the next chapter I present the practice of another internationally significant artist, examining her work as a further example of the delicate balance an artist can achieve to keep in equilibrium the influence of received knowledge with maintaining a distinctive way of seeing and an individual response to the familiar experiences of place. Contextualised within the cultural matrix of the crafts movement within Western Australia as well as nationally, Pippin Drysdale's work is discussed as a cogent response to the *genius loci* of this place that provides the sense of 'locatedness' that ensures its relevance for international audiences.

¹⁷⁵ Ted Snell (2002).

¹⁷⁶ Colin McCahon produced a body of work from his regional base in New Zealand that has been acknowledged internationally. As Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Stedelijk Museum explained in 'Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith': 'McCahon was the artist who gave New Zealand a powerful visual identity and for that he is revered in his homeland. That he went further, to explore and communicate through the medium of painting the universal questions and concerns of humanity, is why we, in other parts of the world, must recognise him as a great modern Master' (2002, p.12).

Pippin Drysdale: Lines of site

The view from here and there

Despite the fact that individual craft practitioners had achieved recognition at a national and international level by the 1980s, and, although a great deal of research and interest had been directed toward Western Australian visual culture since the State's sesquicentenary in 1979, the crafts had been relegated to a secondary role. Yet it is important that this narrative around the burgeoning crafts movement unfolds in tandem with the wider history of local practice. As Janda Gooding proposes:

As research on Western Australian art continues, other overlooked counter narratives may emerge: the histories of regionally based and indigenous artists and of specific mediums such as sculpture or craft will undoubtedly contribute to a richer understanding of local art practice.¹⁷⁷

Indeed, in relative terms, craft practitioners have been a great deal more successful than their peers in the fine arts, both in entering the national and international arena and in earning accolades and acknowledgement. However, measured by the monographs and major survey exhibitions held in the Western Australia's public museums and galleries, craft practitioners lagged well behind their fine-art colleagues. There had been monographs on important craftsmen like John Barker¹⁷⁸ and James W R Linton,¹⁷⁹ though in both cases their fine art credentials were equally prominent. There was a survey exhibition of the work of Helen Grey-Smith,¹⁸⁰ though once again her work in textiles was balanced with her work in painting and collage. In 1984 I had contributed an essay to the monograph on Joan Campbell.¹⁸¹ But because of the contribution of craft practitioners to the State's visual culture and their impact nationally and internationally in focusing attention on Western Australian cultural life, it was clear that a great deal more attention was deserved.

¹⁷⁷ Janda Gooding (2008, p.iii).

¹⁷⁸ David Bromfield (1984a).

¹⁷⁹ Anne Gray (1986).

¹⁸⁰ Maggie Baxter (1987).

¹⁸¹ Lucille Hanley (1984).

The infrastructure for the crafts was no less solid and the climate no less vibrant than for the fine arts. Indeed, it could be argued that it was more focused and better organised¹⁸²— there was a journal, *Craftwest*,¹⁸³ devoted to the work of local practitioners and a number of organisations. Most significantly, the Crafts Council of Western Australia, established in the late 1960s, promoted and supported their activity. Nevertheless, by sheer weight of numbers and due to a long established hierarchy that accorded greater significance to painting and sculpture, there was less research within academia.¹⁸⁴ The public museums and galleries contributed to this imbalance.

In her extensive research on the crafts in Western Australia, Dorothy Erickson has shown that the mineral boom of the 1960s and the erosion of isolation through new technologies, led to the changes that saw a proliferation of activity in the crafts. It is worthwhile quoting her views at length because Erickson's research described the social and cultural environment that was forming in the State following the mining boom of the 1960s and raised many of the key issues that influenced the development of local practice.

The State, only propelled into the reality of the Commonwealth by the fiscal policies put in place during World War Two, was less than a generation later part of a global culture. One in which contemporary design had become part of the popular life as people reacted against the sterility of mass production and sought to assert their individuality by distinctive surroundings. The search for quality of life and personal expression played a part in the movement. Editor Joy Warren wrote in the first issue of *Craft Australia*:

Everywhere in Australia people are finding that they need to make things, themselves with their own hands. They and the objects they make are part of a spontaneous and

¹⁸² See Grace Cochrane (1992) for a brief history of Western Australian crafts and an assessment of the sector's dynamism and effectiveness from the 1970s.

¹⁸³ The Crafts Council of Western Australia's newsletter was renamed *Craftwest* in 1973.

¹⁸⁴ Dorothy Erickson had chosen to focus on the crafts as her field of study at the University of Western Australia and Dr Robyn Taylor had researched the architectural history of the State, but the larger number of students undertaking their doctoral studies at UWA had worked within the Fine Arts. In Bromfield's *Essays on Western Australian Art History* (1988) there were no essays on the crafts although there were two on architecture.

international movement to find individual satisfaction and fulfillment, and to improve the quality of life (Craft Australia 1.1 1971).

Artists and craftsmen who could supply individual items were eagerly patronised. Geoff Allen, Robert Juniper, Irwin Crowe, Margaret Priest, Bernard Tandy, Hans Arkeveld, Gowers and Brown and Francis Gill were busily engaged in commissions for churches and other public buildings.¹⁸⁵

Erikson alluded to the change in attitude away from the 'insulation of location' that saw a changing perspective emerge from both within the State as well as externally.

The 1970s was a time of great change and escalating development – of regionalism within internationalism. No longer was everything 'over there'. 'Here' was over there for other people in the global culture which developed. The ability of people and works to travel and share in this international community was extremely important to their practice as was the sharing of knowledge gained once they returned.¹⁸⁶

Significantly, rather than categorising it as a retrograde parochial response, as others had done, Erikson also discusses the focus on the landscape within that international context and so locates the approach of local craft practitioners at the cutting edge of a global movement.

Engagement with international activity through travel, exhibitions and visits to the State by major international figures was a major factor in the growing self-confidence and it indeed provided 'An Australian Accent'.¹⁸⁷ Robert Bell observed:

There is an investigative and co-operative spirit amongst Western Australian jewellers and this, combined with the influence of visiting craftsmen from different disciplines, has led to continually innovative work which, if not specially Western Australian in character, expresses the spirit of shared experience which can be a rewarding aspect of being part of a small community.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Dorothy Erickson (1991, p.5).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* (p.11).

¹⁸⁷ See John Kaldor (1984). Kaldor's belief that the best Australian art 'is an individual expression that is both Australian and valid as a contribution to international contemporary art' (p.8).

¹⁸⁸ Robert Bell (1979).

A lot was happening in the West. This energy acted as a stimulus for the boom of the 1970s that saw the emergence of several key figures who quickly developed national and even international reputations within the craft movement. Two central figures in this major change in impetus and direction were Joan Campbell and Robert Bell. In my contribution to the monograph on Campbell, I alluded to her central role in this revision of the crafts:

within Australia the crafts movement was making substantial gains on 'credibility'. Whilst the visual arts remain pre-eminent, the crafts and craftsmen have established a position of respect and influence which would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. It is the realisation of Leach's ideal of the artist's role in society. Joan Campbell had her early major exhibitions at the Old Fire Station Gallery, at the time the most adventurous gallery in Western Australia, and so aided in the re-evaluation of the crafts and craftsmen in that State. She cemented her position as an artist-craftsman and by showing in a gallery demanded a critical response and recognition equivalent to this new status.¹⁸⁹

Campbell had no illusions about the quality and importance of her work. Her exhibitions at the Old Fire Station were presented with an evident *chutzpah*, generated by her sense of herself as a successful artist with a burgeoning international reputation.

In part due to the cohesive network of craft associations (both nationally and internationally) and the growing self confidence of the sector following the boom of the 1960s (which saw the crafts established as a major force in contemporary visual arts practice), an artist from Western Australia could join an international elite of practitioners and find recognition in Europe and the United States of America. They could have their work purchased by major museums and galleries, be invited to give workshops and lectures and join national and international boards and governing councils. And Joan Campbell was the proof. By the early 1970s she was already on the international circuit and inviting major international figures such as Paul Soldner¹⁹⁰ to

¹⁸⁹ Lucille Hanley (1984, p.33).

¹⁹⁰ Paul Soldner was a leading contemporary ceramic artist who gave a number of workshops in Perth in 1973 on the invitation of Joan Campbell who had studied with him in the United States in 1970.

visit her in Perth. The other central figure in the crafts movement in the State was Robert Bell, whose early exhibitions in ceramics and fibre identified him as an audacious artist in tune with major international movements, determined to make work that, while identifiably coming from somewhere, was aimed at an audience 'over there'.

I exhibited Bell's early large-scale weavings at the Christ Church Grammar School Chapel in 1972 while I was Senior Art Master. Later, when reviewing his 1986 exhibition for *Craft Arts International*, I claimed that:

Robert Bell is a well-known artist on the local and national stage. However, his significant role in the administration and promotion of craft in Australia has restricted his working time in recent years. Consequently there was a good deal of speculation about the nature of this new work on his return. Would it be clay, fibre or perhaps a return to the large woven forms of the early 1970s? As it turned out, the new works continued many of the themes of the earlier work, but the forms and the manner of fabrication are different. Instead of the labour-intensive woven pieces he made ten years ago, or the massive ceramic slab constructions that followed them, he has recently adopted the more humble (almost instinctual) techniques of binding and wrapping. Indeed, when Robert Bell talks about the work he most admires he constantly returns to those artists who employ a 'direct way of working with materials that are readily at hand', whether they be the masters of Japanese packaging or the mummy binders of ancient Egypt.¹⁹¹

After Bell was appointed to the staff of the Art Gallery of Western Australia as the first Curator of Craft in 1978, the situation for local craft practitioners changed markedly. Not only were their works purchased for the State's leading cultural institution, but they were also included in exhibitions surveying at first local, then later national, and, by the 1990s, international trends. The changing status of the crafts also generated a more confident and empowered arts community.

The newly energised environment for the crafts had an impact on the students working at Perth Technical College alongside their lecturers Ian Smith, Petrus Spronk and David Hunt. I observed that

¹⁹¹ Ted Snell (1986b, p.83).

outside the Tech there was also a growing sense of internationalism, generated by the visits of major artists such as Paul Soldner and the international success of locally based artists such as Joan Campbell. Local horizons had lifted dramatically and the possibility of working alongside Soldner at workshops in the Perth Hills, or discussing international trends with Joan Campbell after one of her overseas visits, or indeed of chatting with Smith, Spronk and Hunt, was a way of connecting to the wider community of ceramic artists and of feeling part of something globally significant. These debates were fuelled by the new exhibitions arriving at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where Robert Bell had just been appointed as the Curator of Craft. *Sodeisha: Avant Garde Japanese Ceramics* and *Image and Ideas: British Ceramics* were both exhibited at the gallery in 1980.¹⁹²

Many other individuals were making a contribution to this changing environment for the crafts through leadership roles in teaching as well as being significant designer-makers in their own right. Eileen Keys,¹⁹³ David Walker¹⁹⁴ and Geoffrey Allen¹⁹⁵ were three of the more prominent artists whose work and contribution to the sector I discussed in articles and catalogue essays published in *Craft Arts International*, *Art and Australian*, *Pottery in Australia* and *Craftwest* from the 1980s.

I was conscious of the role my critical writing might have in assisting with this task of building audiences and generating a climate of critical acceptance for the work of Western Australian craft artists. Writing in *Praxis M* in 1984, I outlined the theoretical foundations of my critical writing:

The critic is able to employ his/her knowledge and experience in interpreting the visual evidence provided by the art work and, rather than obfuscate meaning, this interpretation can aide in the elucidation of the work's diverse set of meanings. This is not to claim that interpretations can be unlimited or arbitrary, for if they transgress certain limits they can be wrong. The visual evidence of (Wittgenstein's) duck/rabbit does not support a reading of these lines as a vase of flowers, for instance, so, although the possible readings may be indefinite, they are not unlimited and the critic can be proved wrong on the evidence of the work. The critic's job is to encourage the potential audience

¹⁹² Ted Snell (2007a, p.57).

¹⁹³ Ted Snell (1987a).

¹⁹⁴ Ted Snell (1995c, pp.90-92).

¹⁹⁵ Ted Snell (1999a; 2001b).

for art works to be open to this diversity of interpretation and to put the viewer in a position where they can see for themselves what is being claimed for the work: but the final judgment is theirs.¹⁹⁶

As a way of encouraging audiences to engage more intently and more frequently with the work of local artists, I finished my polemic by quoting Arnold Isenberg's comment that 'the critic's meaning is 'filled-in', 'rounded out' and 'completed' by the act of perception'.¹⁹⁷

My commitment to building audiences and generating a critically receptive community led me to research an article exploring the use of landscape imagery as inspiration in local craft practice, co-written with Robert Cook and published in *Craftwest* in 1996 and quoted in an earlier chapter of this exegesis. Because so much local art¹⁹⁸ and craftwork was inspired by the natural environment, the article urged 'combining this wide eyed wonder and openness to landscape with a critical distance to the forms of appropriation of the land'.¹⁹⁹ I believe this was the artists' way of critiquing our place in the world through the cultural representations of the land as a source of inspiration. The cover for this issue of the magazine was an image of one of Pippin Drysdale's *Eastern Goldfields* series of glazed ceramic vessels, which exemplified these issues and over the next decade, her work became the focus of my research. Drysdale was, like Joan Campbell before her, an artist working from a local base who had built an international reputation since her first sojourn to the United States in 1984. In the intervening two decades she had established herself as one of the leading artists, working internationally in glazed porcelain through exhibitions in the USA, Europe and Japan and through acquisition of her work into major galleries and private collections.

The project to prepare a monograph on Drysdale in tandem with a major survey exhibition was arduous, requiring a great deal of exploratory

¹⁹⁶ Ted Snell (1984/85, p.22).

¹⁹⁷ Arnold Isenberg (1969).

¹⁹⁸ See also my article on the work of Robert Juniper (2001c).

research and background investigation of the craft scene that had burgeoned in Western Australia since the late 1970s. Similar to the Howard Taylor project, the great bulk of works were held in major public and private collections in Western Australia and a large number of the significant people in Drysdale's life and work were available to clarify issues and provide commentary. Unlike the case with Howard Taylor, the nature of ceramic practice, which generates a larger number of works with each firing, and the unrecorded gifts of those works by the artist to individuals around the globe, precluded the generation of a *Catalogue Raisonné*. As a result, situated within the context of local and national practice, the project employed an established model²⁰⁰ of elaborating the development of the artist's work in tandem with an exposition of their life.

In terms of my previous research interests, Drysdale's work brought a new perspective to previous discussions of 'sense of place', regionalism and the benefits or otherwise of geographic isolation. In particular, her work focused attention on the potential for artists working from a local base to engage nationally and internationally and so to both project a view from Western Australia out into the world and simultaneously respond to how that work is received and interpreted. Most importantly, as I explained in my introduction to the monograph, Drysdale is an artist who responds to the physical environments she inhabits.

Over the last quarter century Pippin has been refining her forms, her materials and her language to create a unique body of work that is a response to the landscapes of Australia, Pakistan, India, Italy and Russia. Although she is an urban artist, she seeks out places that have a particular character or resonance, such as the Tanami Desert in central northern Western Australia or the Hunsa Valley at the end of the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan. Once she has absorbed the site, she carries its colours, sounds, patterns and ambience back to the studio, where she patiently recreates their hum and echo in the delicate web of glazes etched into and brushed onto the surfaces of her elegantly

¹⁹⁹ Ted Snell and Robert Cook (1996).

²⁰⁰ See the series, *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft*, published by Object and Craftsman House Press. 2005 & 2008.

shaped forms. They are lines of site, of smell, of taste and of memory.

She has always been a peripatetic artist, seeing out new environments, new challenges, and from these experiences setting benchmarks against which to test herself. ... Her desire has been to belong to the rest of the world and to bring to these exchanges an openness that elicits reciprocity.²⁰¹

In many ways, Drysdale's work exemplifies the concept of 'sense of place' first formulated by George Seddon in numerous books and articles and elaborated by others, including myself in *The Artist's Rottnest*.

As an artist who both works from the land and in response to it, Drysdale brings a valuable nuance to the discussion of Seddon's notion of *genius loci*: the principle that 'an environment becomes a landscape only when it is so regarded by people, and especially when they begin to shape it in accord with their taste and needs'.²⁰²

Being aware of the similarities between the practice of working with the land (the earth, clay, minerals and chemical processes) and referencing it as a source of inspiration has also given her the opportunities to situate herself within the landscape and reflect upon her interactions – social, cultural and economic – with the environments she has chosen to live and work in. This has been an ongoing process of analysis and it has generated a self-reflexive response to her work and her own self-image. Rather than identifying uncritically with the land in ignorance of the ideologically determined nature of our relationship with this place, she has sought to find ways to comment on these connections through environmentally focused works that enable her to respond to the cultural, social and ecological underpinnings of our sense of belonging.²⁰³

Drysdale's early engagements with the Western Australian landscape resulted in extraordinary but hard won responses to the colour, geology, topography, history and grandeur of the desert around Kalgoorlie. The works from her *Eastern Goldfields* series were painterly in their application: shifting surfaces generated from a form of expressive seismic mark making in response to encounters in the landscape.

²⁰¹ Ted Snell, (2007a, p.32).

²⁰² George Seddon (1997, p.111).

²⁰³ Snell, (2007a, p.36).

In his review of the exhibition in *The West Australian*, Ric Spencer identified that they were 'rigorous yet restrained, the greens and yellows held together by the cracks in a cleverly observed reconstruction of earth' and that this reconstruction is generated from a sense of being in the landscape.

Like many before her, Drysdale associates place with artistic expression in what becomes a personal dialogue. This personal relationship is particularly relevant in the later work, which is distinctly different from her earlier heavily lusted works. The earlier observed reconstructions have slowly been replaced with a more subdued resonance and an alignment of form with line that produces works of being. Not reflection, not artistic responses, but of being with place and this is the dimension of mature and highly articulated art.²⁰⁴

Drysdale's ability to respond to the landscape and to imbue the work with her own experiences translated, but without losing the immediacy that resonates with her audience, was also recognised in an early review by David Bromfield:

In the *Eastern Goldfields* series, Drysdale first achieved the complexity, the reticulation of surface and shadow that led to the *Tanami* series. Like a magic lens, the sensuous painted surface of the vessel seems to reflect a landscape thousands of miles wide, a new infinity, worlds within worlds. ... At other moments one might be gazing down from on high into the deepest and purest of oceans, shifting from a close up, microscopic moment, a crystalline event, to the broadest and slowest of views. These shifting shapes may have taken millennia to form; on the other hand, one may be encountering the transitory effect of clouds, sculptured by shifting light and wind.²⁰⁵

It was Drysdale's ability to succinctly evoke the moods and ambience of the landscapes she encountered that became a central theme of my monograph study of her work and shaped the installation of her work at the John Curtin Gallery in 2007.

In her foreword to *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*, Grace Cochrane pointed out that Drysdale was working within a longer history of

²⁰⁴ Ric Spencer (2007, p.13).

²⁰⁵ David Bromfield (1999, p.7).

Australian ceramic artists who have attempted to generate the sense of place identified by George Seddon:

It is not uncommon for ceramicists to use the materials of the earth itself to express their feelings about a particular place. Before her, in Western Australia, both Eileen Keys, with her use of local clays in the 1960s, and Joan Campbell's organic forms of the 1970s and 1980s were also responses to their location. Further afield, from people who have spent a lifetime exploring these ideas, Peter Rushforth's *jun* glazes suggest the skies over the Blue Mountains; Milton Moon's vases can refer to red river gums and the Adelaide Hills; Maria Gazzard's *Uluru* series drew on the form and texture of vast rocky outcrops of Central Australia; and on both his vessel and ceramic wall panels, Mitsuo Shoji refers to fire and rain in the Australian environment.²⁰⁶

For Drysdale, this meant not only creating a surface that echoed the environment, but also an interior that evoked a personal and physical response.

One of the marvellous secrets in each work is the hollow void saturated with colour that provides an inner radiance, both mesmerising and seductive. In the *Boab* series the orange glow is so intense it seems to create another light source within the room. In contrast to the mesh of white lines cut into the black skin of the pot it looks ready to detonate, its containment only temporary, the form just strong enough to hold it in, the four forms together looking like reactors whose core might soon explode.²⁰⁷

The exhibition, *Lines of Site*, that accompanied the publication of the book, also had a catalogue featuring the new body of closed forms that were not included in the monograph. Due to the long production time required for the publication, her new body of work had not been completed. So the smaller exhibition catalogue focused on her *Kimberley* series. It also provided an opportunity to reiterate the nature of the artist's project and her specific relationship to the physical environment of Western Australia.

Drysdale has always pushed at the boundaries of her practice, always sought out new challenges and taken the kind of risks that would daunt most practitioners. The *Kimberley Series* is one of her greatest achievements, not only because it pushes further into new territory than her previous projects, but also because of

²⁰⁶ Grace Cochrane (2007, p.22).

²⁰⁷ Ted Snell (2005a, p.20).

its extraordinary achievement in translating and re-imaging the specificity of place. The more than one hundred individual closed forms that make up the series are a *tour de force*, each one a small gem that requires close inspection but together they coalesce into a vast panorama that is awe inspiring in its scope and scale – just like the Kimberley itself.²⁰⁸

The artist herself explains that this ability to ‘draw emotion and feeling from the landscape’²⁰⁹ is at the core of her practice. And as David Bromfield perceptively commented in his catalogue for her *Red Desert* exhibition in Germany, ‘Metaphor becomes metonym, memory became intractably physical, inscribed in clay, an immutable presence’.²¹⁰

At the same time that the exhibition, *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*, opened at the John Curtin Gallery on 21 June 2007, the book was launched. The two-part project received strong critical support, prompting Ric Spencer to conclude his review with the comment that ‘Lines of Site is a thoughtful, thorough retrospective that is well worth spending some time with’²¹¹ and Margot Osborne to suggest that the book set a benchmark:

Primarily though, it is the calibre of the research and writing by Ted Snell that lifts this monograph. Here we have a writer who is the equal of his subject – in terms of professional credentials, skill and insight. Snell has written a substantial book of five chapters, dividing Drysdale’s artistic evolution into four eras. His research is thorough, delving first into her upbringing and then revealing her artistic development almost vessel by vessel from her beginnings in the 1980s to her present status as a distinguished Australian ceramist of international standing.²¹²

This was vindication of the original intent of developing the retrospective survey as a two-part project that linked the exhibition of previous work with a monograph.

²⁰⁸ Ted Snell (2007c, p.17).

²⁰⁹ Pippin Drysdale, quoted in Ted Snell, (2007, p.130).

²¹⁰ David Bromfield (2003).

²¹¹ Ric Spencer (2007, p.13).

²¹² Margot Osborne (2007, p.78).

In the preceding chapters I have shown how since the Second World War the visual arts in Western Australia established a vibrant sense of regional identity that has made a significant contribution to our understanding of a wider and more comprehensive view of cultural practice in Australia. In the conclusion, I revisit the key issues that have shaped my curatorial interpretation and analysis of Western Australian art and position my books, scholarly articles, journalism, academic and curatorial work as case studies that extrapolate and investigate national and international debates on the role of locale in creating a relevant and sustainable art practice.

Conclusion Review

Since the State's sesquicentennial in 1979, a great deal has changed in Western Australia's cultural landscape. When I first began publishing articles in *Art and Australia* and writing newspaper and radio reviews of local exhibitions for *The Western Mail* and the ABC, little was published on the history of Western Australian art. Outside the State there was only a grudging acknowledgment of one or two key figures in local arts practice. The trickle of books purporting to survey national activity in the visual arts, which grew into a stream over the following decade, largely ignored Western Australian artists or included one or two token figures, usually Robert Juniper and Guy Grey-Smith.²¹³ Additionally, curators failed to visit Perth when selecting for national survey exhibitions,²¹⁴ with the result that local artists were not included and their work not purchased for many public galleries. As a consequence, their practice was unknown to the increasing number of private collectors. The citizens of the artists' own State did not value their work.

The mood of optimism ignited by the mining boom of the 1960s, the international recognition that came with the spotlight of the US space program and John Glenn's epithet for Perth as the 'City of Lights' in 1962, along with the Empire and Commonwealth Games in the same year, refocused Western Australians' image of themselves as international participants. Encouraged by this increased sense of achievement, the celebration of 150 years of white occupation led to a rekindled – or perhaps newly kindled – interest in history. Funding was provided for major projects exploring the history of visual arts practice in Western Australia, beginning with Barbara Chapman's *Colonial Eye* in

²¹³ In Bernard Smith's first edition of *Australian Painting*, published in 1962 by Melbourne University Press, Juniper, Grey-Smith and John Lunghi were the only artists mentioned on one page that covered current practice in Australia.

²¹⁴ John Stringer, curator of the famous *Field* exhibition, held to mark the opening of the new National Gallery of Victoria building on St Kilda Road in 1968, acknowledged later than had he known of the work of Howard Taylor he would most definitely have included him, but travel budgets precluded a visit to Perth, Adelaide, Hobart or Brisbane.

1979, followed soon after by the Western Australian Institute of Technology's *The Foulkes Taylor Years* and the publications generated by David Bromfield at the newly established Centre for Fine Arts at the University of Western Australia. My critical writing, the essays for *Art and Australia* and my two books surveying Western Australian art practice, *The Artist's Rottnest* and *Cinderella on the Beach*, made a significant contribution to this historical revision during a dynamic period in which local practice in the visual arts was finally accorded the attention it deserved, both internally and increasingly from outside the State as well.

Albeit with a very focused lens, *The Artist's Rottnest* was one of the first to encompass the entire visual culture of the State. Including the work of Indigenous artists and European artists who visited as well as those who settled and those who were born in Western Australia, my book presented a comprehensive survey of local practice in response to a specific site. Documenting the long history of human engagement with a particular geographic locale and the impact on the environment, in essence, it was a case study based on George Seddon's notion of 'sense of place'. I also situated these works within the broader social, cultural and economic conditions of life. My critique was responsive to the then current centre/periphery debates and discussions on the role of regionalism in describing an alternative history to the mainstream orthodoxies of art history; it was the first of a series of projects in Australia that examined the history of particular sites through a parallel history of artistic engagement. *The Artist's Rottnest* was acknowledged by Jane Hylton, curator of *The Painted Coast: Views of the Fleurieu Peninsula South of Adelaide* (held at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1998) and Rodney James, curator of *The Artists' Retreat: Discovering the Mornington Peninsula 1850s to the Present* (held at the Mornington Regional Gallery in 1999), as a model for their explorations of the cultural history of key sites in their own states. In 1988, it was

shortlisted for the Non-Fiction category in the Western Australian Premier's Book Award.

The research required for the project provided additional interpretations of local art practice and uncovered primary source material that elucidated some of the key themes underpinning past and current perceptions of Western Australian art and artists. The publication of Janda Gooding's catalogue to accompany the exhibition *Western Australian Art and Artists 1900-1950* in 1987 followed on from Barbara Chapman's *Colonial Eye* exhibition and catalogue. Together, these two projects charted the history of local visual arts practice from the first European contact until mid-way through the twentieth century. In the process of researching *The Artist's Rottnest*, I encountered many texts that highlighted the themes of mediation that, as Janda Gooding explained, were an attempt at 'absorbing and repelling ideas and attitudes to produce an overlay of harmony, continuity and consensus'²¹⁵. To bring them into a wider discussion and make them available to secondary and tertiary students, I proposed to the University of Western Australia Press the idea of compiling these documents into a 'source book of Western Australia's visual culture'. The new syllabus, released by the Education Department in the late 1980s, encouraged greater knowledge of Western Australian art and artists.

Along with the increased interest in local art history at the tertiary level, the need to provide resources for students was one of the motivating factors behind the project. The Centre for Fine Arts at the University of Western Australia had begun to teach units in local art history. At the major art schools, the change from being located within Colleges of Advanced Education to Universities (the Western Australian Institute of Technology was renamed Curtin University of Technology in 1987 and the Western Australian College of Advanced Education

²¹⁵ Janda Gooding (1987, p10).

renamed Edith Cowan University in 1991) led to an renewed focus on theory and history. With only Gooding and Chapman's catalogues, my book on Rottnest and the early publications emerging from the Centre for Fine Arts as resources for these new courses, a textbook was required. Though never intended as a comprehensive history, a task already underway at the University of Western Australia,²¹⁶ *Cinderella on the Beach* was designed to prompt further research. Each section identified themes and extrapolated key ideas, provided a short synopsis of individuals, agencies and, events and through the provision of source material, opened up avenues of further research and investigation.

The book was indeed a stimulus for further research, not only within the tertiary and secondary sectors but also more widely. Just over ten years following the publication of *Cinderella on the Beach*, Professor Geoffrey Bolton at Edith Cowan University and his colleagues across a number of academic disciplines published a collection of essays in response to the its major themes. In their introduction, the editors referenced the contribution my book had made as a stimulus to their endeavours as they 'bid farewell to the defensive position taken on cultural activities because Western Australia has arrived at the ball – but not without a struggle. It is the history of that struggle that engages the contributors to this collection'.²¹⁷ Furthermore, Neville Weston proposed, in the concluding sentence to his essay in *Farewell Cinderella*, that

Against the backdrop of global concerns for conservation and good management of the landscape, the landscape-based art of Western Australia, especially its most recent regionalist manifestations, holds a new currency for the wider art world.²¹⁸

After two decades of scholarly research that spawned numerous publications and an increasing number of exhibitions, the appreciation and critical interpretation of local arts practice had grown significantly.

²¹⁶ David Bromfield had begun a history of Western Australian art in the mid 1980s but it was never published.

²¹⁷ Geoffrey Bolton, Richard Rossiter and Jan Ryan (2003, p.1).

²¹⁸ Neville Weston (2003, p.202).

One of the major figures that prompted the re-evaluation of regional practice described by Weston was Howard Taylor. My monograph and the earlier catalogue written by Gary Dufour for Taylor's retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1985 were the agents of that reassessment. Taylor was relatively unknown outside Western Australia until his retrospective and even after that major showcase he was known to only a small group of curators and dedicated private collectors. Living in the small hamlet of Northcliffe, deep in the State's south west, he had escaped the increasing pace of city life in 1968, working with singular focus to describe the forest and the play of light across its varied surfaces.

Taylor's practice and the extraordinary works he created over five decades of dedicated engagement with his subject matter was the epitome of the position I had been promoting as a form of 'critical regionalism', the term I borrowed from Kenneth Frampton. Taylor did indeed 'mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place'.²¹⁹ He created works that reinforced Ian Burn's belief that

for peripheral cultures, the mediation of influence may also be a constructed and self-conscious process. ... The points of mediation represent an intersection of different cultural histories and interests, a locus of strategies of exchange and transformation, of dominance and resistance. At the margins of modern art, this constructed mediation animates an important mode of critical practice'.²²⁰

My *Catalogue Raisonné* of the artist's work detailed the ways in which Taylor had absorbed, modified and critiqued the works of other artists and brought his own visual intelligence to bear on the process of transformation in response to local references. I showed how this complex process, described by Gerard Genette as 'transtextuality', provided a framework for understanding Taylor's contribution to Western Australian visual culture. Taylor is an exemplar of an artist

²¹⁹ Kenneth Frampton (1985a, p.20).

²²⁰ Ian Burn (1991, p. 204).

working in the gaps between already existing artworks (texts) and the actual conditions (both physically and socially) in which he practiced. My study of his contribution provided insights into the ways in which the centre and the periphery can enter into a reciprocal dialogue.

When Lewis Biggs coined the expression ‘local international’ in his catalogue for *New North: New Art from the North of Britain*,²²¹ it problematised a construction of modernity that positioned the local in opposition to the cosmopolitan. It also provided a framework within which Frampton’s emphasis on context and respect for the complexity of ‘local conditions’ – the cultural, social and political as well as the climatic, topographical and so on – could be better understood. The particular orientation and hence unique perspective brought by artists such as Taylor, who was so embedded within a specific locale, were highlighted. Indeed, the criticality of his practice is a condition of this context, which is the spatial referent for all interpretations, revisions and historical events. This space was a measure for gauging his response to issues that impacted on his life that were then given visual forms developed from his engagement with place. For Doreen Massey, this place is not static, but rather a dynamic conception that locates

social interactions as processes; ... without rigid boundaries and defined as much through its particular linkages with the ‘outside’ as by any simple sense of enclosure; as being defined as much by internal conflict and contestation as by any sense of unique, consensual ‘identity’; and as having a specificity which is continually reproduced through the mixing of cosmopolitan and local relations and histories.²²²

By undertaking this case study of his work I provided new insights into his practice as well as evidence for a conception of ‘sense of place’ that was expansive and dynamic, genuinely cosmopolitan in its ability to encompass current ideas and constructions, while always responsive to its particular local context. David Bromfield concluded his review of *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure* with an assessment of the book’s long-

²²¹ Lewis Biggs (1990).

²²² Doreen Massey (1996, pp.315-323).

term contribution to scholarship in Western Australian art history:

This is an important book which raises many questions about the way West Australians have dealt with artists and their heritage. It is accessible and well-written. It will become a significant resource for future studies of the development of WA art.²²³

The book received a number of other reviews,²²⁴ all positive, and later in the year was shortlisted for the Non-Fiction category in the Western Australian Premier's Book Award.

The five-year project to document the life and work of Howard Taylor raised many issues about the nature of the visual arts in Western Australia and the degree to which certain individuals and/or modes of practice were promoted and supported. It also provided a framework upon which to build further investigations of the life and work of individual Western Australian artists, a project I undertook over the following decade through the mechanism of survey exhibitions supported by comprehensive catalogues.²²⁵

During this period I made a significant contribution within the curatorial field by extending the format of the survey exhibition to include a particular focus on the individual artist's mode of production and their relationship to their community in all its complexity and interconnectedness. By setting the parameters of the survey to a nominated period of practice, by engaging the catalogue as both a record of the installation of the exhibition and a companion text to illustrate and elucidate key themes, the exhibitions at the John Curtin Gallery gained a national reputation for presenting a highly focused and rigorous investigation of an artist's practice. This examination of the nature of the exhibition format and how it might be employed to

²²³ David Bromfield (1995, p.7).

²²⁴ Louise Martin Chew (1995, p.119); John Barrett-Lennard (1995, p.33); Traudi Allen (1995, pp.25-26); Jenny de Garis (1995, p.1).

²²⁵ *Ben Joel - Instrumental*, John Curtin Gallery, 16 September - 9 December 2005; *Miriam Stannage: Sensations*, John Curtin Gallery, 9 February - 13 April 2006; *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*, John Curtin Gallery, 22 June - 10 August 2007.

illuminate the complex interconnections that shape an artist's career led to the next major project – a survey exhibition and monograph on the work of Western Australian ceramic artist Pippin Drysdale.

Although research into the visual arts had burgeoned since the State's sesquicentennial, the crafts were largely overlooked. With a few notable exceptions (James W R Linton, Joan Campbell, Eileen Keys and Helen Grey-Smith) little attention was given to a major area of creative endeavour that had been a significant force in shaping attitudes about the landscape and documenting European engagement with this unique environment and its original owners and custodians. In the early 1990s, I focused my research on aspects of the crafts and through essays and reviews, teased out issues that impacted on the development of the field and on the practice of individual craft practitioners.

Drysdale's work not only provided a new perspective from which to re-examine earlier discussions of 'sense of place', regionalism and the benefits or otherwise of geographic isolation. It also focused attention on the potential for artists working from a local base to engage nationally and internationally, to both project a view from Western Australia out into the world and simultaneously responding to how that work is received and interpreted. More and more artists working on the geographic periphery began to engage with the artistic centres. Through the increased availability of travel and the instant interaction provided by new communication technologies, a re-conceptualisation of what it might mean to be based somewhere re-energised debates about regionalism and individual engagement with particular landscapes and environments.

The specific task of the book and the exhibition, *Lines of Site*, was to provide opportunities for reader/viewers to encounter these works from a position of informed engagement with the ideas and experiences that

generated them as well as the theoretical and cultural context that shaped them. According to Margot Osborne, I achieved that objective:

As the title *Lines of Site* implies, Pippin Drysdale's vessels are intimately connected to the West Australian landscape. Juxtaposition of vessels with the glorious landscape photography of Richard Woldendorp reveals how closely her ceramics are grounded in the tonal and linear patterns of the land. Snell is at his best articulating this quality of poetic immanence and of resonance with the landscape. Through in-depth engagement with particular vessels or series he traces her increasing mastery of the allusive and abstract power of the ceramic medium. He has a rare eloquence amongst visual art writers, with the power to avoid both cliché and obfuscation, to find just the right word to illuminate both the art and the artist's intentions.²²⁶

My examination of local practice, seen within the context of international and national perspectives, but not dependent upon them, provides an alternate view of our past and forms the basis for a future in which local practice is valued for its difference. By establishing a critical practice that is located in the peculiarities of place through my books, articles and exhibitions, I have shown how visual arts practice in Western Australia has responded to the cultural hegemony of the eastern and southern seaboard capitals of Melbourne and Sydney and the cultural imperialism of Britain and America.

My ideas have been constructed and presented with the general framework provided by the curatorial process. Whether an article, book or exhibition, the questions confronting me were how to construct meaning by reinforcing the relationship between different works and the context within which they were created. This research has provided the tools and strategies for future examinations of local practice that run parallel to the existing orthodoxies of Australian art history and more honestly and appropriately acknowledges the contribution of Western Australian artists to Australian and international visual culture.

²²⁶ Margot Osborne (2007, p.76).

APPENDIX VOLUME ONE

Previously Published Material: 4 Books

- Ted Snell. 1988. *The Artist's Rottnest*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- . 1991a. *Cinderella on the Beach: A source book of Western Australia's visual culture*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press.
- . 1995. *Howard Taylor: Forest Figure*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- . 2007a. *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

APPENDIX VOLUME TWO

Previously Published Material: 66 Book chapters, articles, catalogue essays SUBMITTED ON ATTACHED CDROM

Introduction

15 Journal Articles / Catalogue Essays

- Ted Snell. 1984. 'Other Art at the Perth Festival'. *Praxis M* 4: 16-18.
- . 1988. 'Alternative Spaces-Perth'. *Art & Australia* 26(1): 50-51.
- . 1992. 'Brian Blanchflower: Particle Lakes'. *Agenda* 25: 26.
- . 1993. 'Looking West', *State of the Arts* 4: 10.
- . 1996. 'Guy Grey-Smith: Landscapes of Western Australia'. *Art & Australia* 34(1): 42-43.
- . 1996. 'Not so odd'. *Art Monthly* 92: 28-30.
- . 1999. 'After the Crash'. *Periphery* 40&41: 30-33.
- . 2002. 'Deep pockets Patronage and Philanthropy in the West'. *Artlink* 22(3): 13-15.
- . 2003b. 'Indigenous Art from South Western Australia'. *Art & Australia* 41(1): 52-53.
- . 2003c. 'Julie Dowling'. *Art & Australia* 40(3): 499-500.
- . 2004. 'Bigger than Bruce Lee'. *State of the Arts*, The Design Issue: 98-99.
- . 2005. 'Alex Spremberg Paint-Works'. *Artlink* 25(4): 96.
- . 2005. 'Louise Paramor'. *Art & Australia* 42(3): 435.
- . 2006. 'Jeremy Kirwan-Ward New Work', *Artlink* 26(1): 89.
- . 2006. *Conflux*. Perth: John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology.
- . 2007. 'Matthew Ngui Public Artist'. *Artlink* 27(2): 50-60.

The Artist's Rottnest

16 Journal Articles / Catalogue Essays

- Ted Snell. 1979. 'Six Artists Working in Western Australia', *Art and Australia* 16(4): 357-361.
- . 1982. 'Miriam Stannage Image Processor'. *Art and Australia* 20(2): 241-245.
- . 1982. 'Introduction', *The Foulkes Taylor Years*. Perth: Western Australian Institute of Technology: 5-7
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